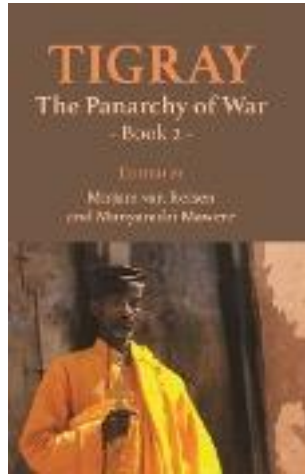


# A Secret Deal to Conceal: The Eritrean Involvement in the Tigray War

*Daniel Tesfa, Mirjam Van Reisen & Kai Smits*

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### A Secret Deal to Conceal: The Eritrean Involvement in the Tigray War

*Daniel Tesfa, Mirjam Van Reisen & Kai Smits*

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*A lie is a one-evening supper.*

#### Abstract

During the Tigray war, a communication blackout and media censorship allowed Ethiopian and Eritrean media to deny Eritrea's involvement in the war, leading to atrocities not being reported and enabling perpetrators to operate with impunity. How did secret diplomacy help conceal the Eritrean involvement in the Tigray war? This question is addressed by investigating the disinformation tactics used to enable the denial of Eritrean involvement in the Tigray war for the first five months of the war, as well as in the preparations for the war. The study revealed that through secret diplomacy, in 2017, Ethiopia received an offer from Eritrea to use the port of Assab in exchange for the 'rehabilitation' of Eritrea's reputation among the international community, towards the lifting of sanctions. This diplomatic effort led to a peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2018, of which the content remains undisclosed. The study shows that subsequently a disinformation campaign concealed Eritrea's involvement in the war and local journalists were intimidated to suppress reports of Eritrea's involvement and associated atrocities, contributing to the disinformation campaign, which obscured the true nature and extent of the conflict. This confusion left many atrocities unreported and the perpetrators unpunished. The blurring of peacebuilding efforts with the ongoing conflict resulted in prolonged instability and a lack of accountability for those responsible for the violence.

**Key words:** Tigray war, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Assab port, Eritrea-Ethiopia Peace Agreement

## Introduction

Disinformation is among the top three most harmful changes in digital life that threaten public security (Pew Research Center, 2023). Disinformation, amplified by the innovation of communication technologies, enables manipulation in the global dissemination of content. According to Jackson (2018), disinformation is not only related to authoritarian propaganda, but also caused by longstanding vulnerabilities in human cognition, combined with the impact of new emerging information technologies used to pursue political gains at the expense of democratic political discourse. The ubiquitous access to communication technology enables global, regional, and local disinformation actors to use multiple communication channels to control, manipulate or hide information to achieve their goals. Disinformation creates fearful and disoriented cognition and post-truth conspiracy which Jackson identifies as “truth decay”. Disinformation causes the decline of public trust in the government, media, collective decisions, and the existing international order (Boulianne & Humprecht, 2023).

The Tigray war broke out on 3 November 2020 (ICHREE, 2023), followed by the declaration of Prime Minister Abiy of Ethiopia of a law enforcement operation on 4 November 2020, claiming an attack on the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) as the reason. Eritrea was among the main actors in the war (ICHREE, 2023; Plaut & Vaughan, 2023; Melicherová *et al.*, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024).

While the involvement of Eritrea and other regional actors made the Tigray war a regional war, the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea denied Eritrea’s participation and presence for five months (3 November 2020 to 24 March 2021). This situation changed when Prime Minister Abiy recognised Eritrea’s involvement while addressing the Ethiopian Parliament on 24 March 2021, thanking Eritrea for its support in the war (EEPA, 2020a; 2020b).

The framing and disinformation used during the war to conceal the presence of Eritrea has been scantily investigated. A few studies found that a myriad of framing, bias and disinformation tactics were used during the Tigray war (Wilmot *et al.*, 2021; Pohjonen, 2022). However,

existing studies focused on Twitter content and campaigns used by Ethiopian government supporters versus Tigrayans. This research explores the official frames and disinformation techniques used to conceal Eritrean involvement and atrocities and the (ongoing) presence of Eritrea in Tigray. This chapter investigates the secret diplomacy that helped conceal Eritrean involvement in the Tigray war, looked at through the disinformation tactics used to enable the denial of the Eritrean involvement for five months.

The research question is: *What were the disinformation tactics used by the Government of Ethiopia to conceal the involvement of the national Eritrean Army in the Tigray war?*

### **Framing, mis- and disinformation**

Framing describes the way in which an issue is characterised in news reports and media communication influences how a problem – or a situation – is understood by audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). The way political communication is framed impacts on how a problem is identified, what solutions are considered, and the consideration of reasons to support certain solutions (Gaechter & Porter, 2018).

The framing of a problem is critical for the shaping of a public agenda, which requires a shared understanding of the problematic conditions of a situation that is defined as needing to be changed (Kingdon, 1984). The framing of a situation creates an attribution regarding who or what is to blame, an articulation of an alternative set of arrangements, and the persuasion to act in concert to affect change (Benford & Snow, 2000). Snow and Benford (1988) coined the core framing tasks as diagnostic framing (problem identification and attributions), prognostic framing (proposed solution), and motivational framing (the intention behind the proposed solution).

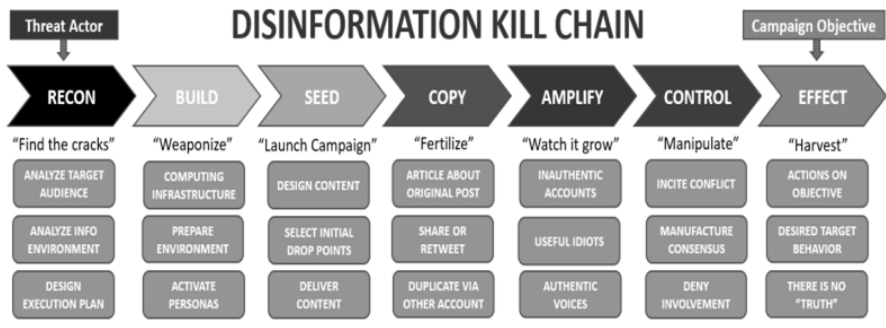
Kingdon (1984) distinguishes three parallel streams that associate with the framing process. The three streams are: (i) the problem stream (which is where the problem is defined or framed); (ii) the policy stream (which is where a solution to a problem is defined or framed), and (iii) the political stream (which is where the saliency or importance of the problem is defined). The convergence of the three

streams determines what can potentially enter the public agenda. The mass media is important in public agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). These framing tasks aim to bring people together to a certain perspective through consensus mobilisation and action mobilisation (Klandermans, 1984).

Informing is a key aspect of creating frames. Informing relates to the content of the information that is disseminated (logos), by whom (ethos), when (kairos), and with what tone (pathos), which have a time-bound dimension, in which it matters who the messenger is (Stocker, 2024). Informing shapes the way we think about a situation. Mis- or disinforming is a tactic purposefully used to interfere with the process of informing to achieve a common consensus on a public agenda and undermines this consensus with deliberately incorrect information intended to establish a common threat:

*The distribution of false, misleading, or inaccurate information with the intent to deceive is an existential threat [...] -- distortion of information erodes trust in the socio-political institutions that are the fundamental fabric of democracy: legitimate news sources, scientists, experts, and even fellow citizens. As a result, it becomes difficult for society to come together within a shared reality; the common ground needed to function effectively as an economy and a nation. (Bliss et al., 2020)*

Such efforts can be analysed as a deliberate process to achieve an effect. The Disinformation Kill Chain Model is a conceptual framework that explains the nature, application, and chains of mis- and disinformation processes in the digital world (Peter *et al.*, 2019). Based on this framework, disinformation is understood as a coordinated effort by threat actors, amplifying the use of communications. The threat actor is the source of the disinformation campaign, which sets objectives that need to be translated into action, seeking either to maintain the status quo or to alter public opinion in a manipulative manner (Peter *et al.*, 2019). The following chart describes the conceptual flow of the Disinformation Kill Chain Model, which was theorised following experiments about the steps followed by state and non-state threat actors.



**Figure 2.1. Disinformation Kill Chain Model adopted from MITRE Corporation**

Source: Peter *et al.* (2019)

The first step in the Disinformation Kill Chain Model is reconnaissance, in which the threat actors analyse the target audience and how the disinformation content flows through the context of the target audience by identifying social fissures to exploit and designing campaign plans to be executed later (Peter *et al.*, 2019). Threat actors invest in building the infrastructure vital to the campaign, including sophisticated communication technologies, operational staff, social media platforms, websites, blogs, and other facilities (Peter *et al.*, 2019). Disinformation campaigns initiated by state actors also use information control mechanisms and diplomatic, propaganda and/or official messaging aiming to dominate the sphere of information (Peter *et al.*, 2019).

After building the necessary infrastructure the threat actor designs the disinformation content and launches the campaign by delivering the content to platforms for the initial disinformation seeding and mainstreaming. Two ways of building this content are observed: creating new disinformation content and distributing priority facts. While the first aims at initiating new disinformation, the second concerns the repurposing of information in multiple alternative perspectives on the issue, which will enable the threat actor to create an illusion on these facts to the audience (Peter *et al.*, 2019).

There are two kinds of collaborators with threat actors that facilitate the copying and the spreading of the disinformation. Witting agents, aware of the motives of the threat actor, multiply the content, assisted



by their media platforms, for seemingly authentic distribution (Peter *et al.*, 2019). The stage in which the information is copied is a form of ‘information laundering’, laying the groundwork for amplification by adding legitimacy to poorly sourced stories (Peter *et al.*, 2019). This content is picked up by unwitting agents, who are victims of the disinformation campaign, and who spread the disinformation to larger audience. The content is amplified by witting agents (quasi-legitimate journalists) and unwitting agents (‘useful idiots’), through which successful amplification results in the content being distributed, including by authentic voices, such as the mainstream media.

For the proposed disinformation frame to gain dominance in the narrative sphere, the threat actor and its collaborators use their communication apparatus to incite conflict, to strengthen the illusion of consensus by trolling comment sections of online posts, to avoid counternarratives by controlling information (and sources), and to deny or accuse the enemy of bringing the story out in a different way (Peter *et al.*, 2019). The threat actors evaluate the effect of their disinformation campaign based on the expressed behaviour of the targeted audience measured against the desired effect (Peter *et al.*, 2019).

Peter *et al.* (2019) stated that the identification of threat actors requires making three preliminary determinations; is the threat actor a nation-state? Is it backed by a nation-state? Is it independent of a nation-state? Is the threat actor based inside or outside the country? Are those collaborating with the threat actor witting or unwitting agents?

Although disinformation is generally a threat to democracy and to public safety, the effect can be manifested as severe when the threat actor is a government. This enables the tuning of its state structures as instruments of the disinformation campaign. This use of state apparatus enables the disinformation to reach audiences repeatedly. The information is from sources that are perceived to be legitimate bodies. This increases the persuasiveness of the message. Any leaders with dissenting views can be easily censored by the state apparatus. Members of the public whose perspectives deviate from the

campaign may also prefer to keep silent for their safety or the safety of their relatives.

The characteristics of state disinformation are explained by Ong and Cabañes (2019). The bipartisan top-down flow of media content, strong military surveillance of information, and direct censorship of online conversations are the dominant tactics used by states to plant fabricated narratives or to cover the facts happenings on the ground (Ong & Cabañes, 2019). The pro-government media will extensively re-use state information while the anti-establishment media organisations often practice an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship to avoid shutdowns by the state (Ong & Cabañes, 2019).

## Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used to study the disinformation tactics used to conceal the involvement of Eritrea in the Tigray war. The following data were collected: media reports, field visits, interviews, observations and document analysis. The timeframe was traced to the first interview in which the President of Eritrea publicly expressed himself in a deliberate way on the situation in Tigray, in January 2018.

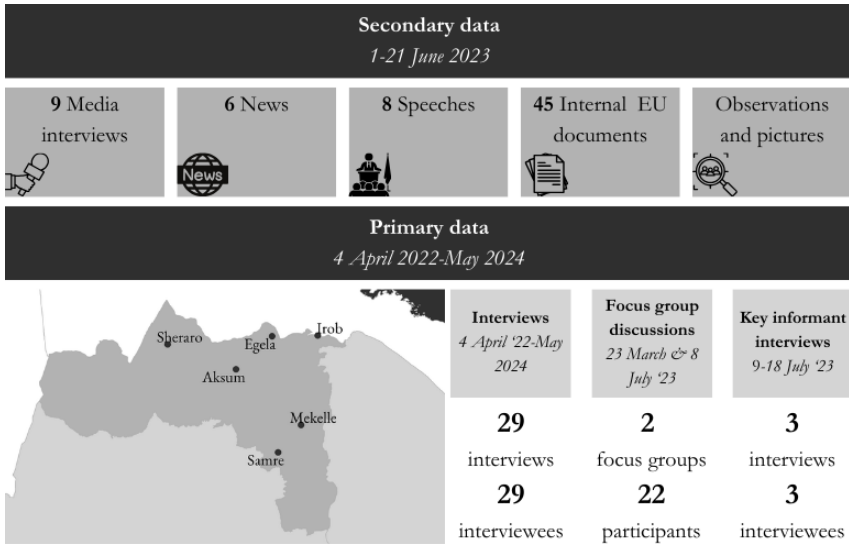


Figure 2.2. Data used and collected in the study

### ***Media data***

The media data were collected from official speeches, interviews, TV news, and Tweets. The Eritrean state owned ERi-TV YouTube page gives access to state media data. With the search term: ‘Isayas Afwerki’<sup>1</sup> the data in the YouTube search engine was explored. The result was 57 pieces of media content, which included interviews, speeches, and news-items. The research team purposively selected 7 media interviews, 7 speeches, and 3 news stories based on relevance.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, through other channels, 2 media interviews, 5 news, and 3 speeches were selected based on their relevance. A total of 8 speeches, 9 media interviews and 6 TV news items were selected. The media data was collected between 1 June 2023 and 14 April 2024. To complement the data, Tweets by government officials, news, and media-interviews on the Tigray war were included.

**Table 2.1. Types of media data used**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Type of media data selected</b>	<b>Source and justification for using the selected media data</b>
1	Speeches (n=8)	Speeches by Eritrean President Isayas Afwerki in Martyrs Day on 20 June 2018 [1], President Isayas Afwerki’s Visit to Gondar – Ethiopia [2], President Isayas Afwerki and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s speeches in their counter visits to Ethiopia and Eritrea [3-6], President Isayas Afwerki’s Speech During Sawa 31st Graduation on 13 July 2018 [7] and Eritrean Independence Day on 24 May 2019 [8].
2	Media interviews (n=9)	Interviews that Eritrean President Isayas Afwerki conducted with ERi-TV on 14 January 2018 [1], 3 November 2018 [2], 1 August 2019 [3], 8 February 2020 [4], 17 February 2021 [5], 8 January 2022 [6], and 18 February 2023 [7] as well

<sup>1</sup> The link gives access to the original search:

[https://www.youtube.com/@EriTV\\_EritreaOfficial/search?query=Isayas%20Afwerki%20Interview](https://www.youtube.com/@EriTV_EritreaOfficial/search?query=Isayas%20Afwerki%20Interview)

<sup>2</sup> Topics rated as relevant: (i) Ethiopia-Eritrea relations including reconciliation, (ii) opening of borders, (iii) Eritrean-Ethiopian alliance and (iv) the Tigray war.

No.	Type of media data selected	Source and justification for using the selected media data
3	TV news (n=6)	<p>as Ethiopia Minister of Democratisation, Zadig Abraha [8], Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister's, Daniel Kibret's interview about Eritrean involvement [9]. We have nine media interviews.</p> <p>ERi-TV news about President Isayas Afwerki's Seminar at the 8th National Festival of Eritrean Youth in Sawa [1], the opening of the Bure border on 11 September 2018 [2] as well as EBC [3] and ERi-TV news about President Isayas Afwerki's visit to Ethiopia on 14 October 2018 [4] as well as news about Eritrea's Foreign Minister, Osman Saleh Mohammed [5] and Ethiopia's Minister of Defence, Kenea Yadeta [6] denying the involvement of Eritrea. We have six news.</p>
4	Tweets and other media interviews	<p>Eritrea's Ministry of Information's, Minister of Information Yemane Gebremeskel, Tweets denying the involvement of Eritrea, Eritrea's Foreign Minister, Osman Saleh Mohammed, and Ethiopia's Minister of Defence, Kenea Yadeta, Ethiopia Minister of Democratisation, Zadig Abraha, Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, Daniel Kibret's, response on a media question about Eritrean involvement and Interim Administration Mayor of Mekelle's, Ataklti Hailelassie, confirmation that Eritrea is part of the Tigray war were purposively selected to examine the disinformation trends.</p>
5	Internal documents (n-45)	<p>45 internal documents of the European Commission were analysed. The documents were received following a formal request for information.</p>

### ***Field visits, interviews and observations***

Field visits were conducted, during which observations were made and interviews carried out. The interview formats employed were (i) in-depth interviews (IDIs), (ii) focus group discussions (FGDs), and (iii) key informant interviews (KIIs). The timeline of the field visits was: Aksum, 23 March 2023; Egela 8-9 July 2023; Sheraro 4–6 May 2023; Samre 11 June 2023; Mekelle 5–20 April 2022 and 2–3 April 2024; Irob on 18 June 2023, and Brussels 25 March 2024, 3 April 2024, 17 April 2024. Key informant interviews were conducted with interim local administration members who oversee providing information about the general overview of the situations, rather than individual stories, which was already addressed in the in-depth interviews. The key informant interviews were conducted with members of the interim government administrations in Tahtay Adyabo, Egela, and Irob woredas. Observations of the Aksum Massacre by one of the research team members and diary notes of his observations were also used in the research. Two focus group discussions were conducted in Aksum on 23 March 2023 and Egela 8 July 2023. In-depth interviews were conducted in Sheraro, Egela, Samre, Mekelle, and Belgium/the Netherlands.

**Table 2.2. Data collection tools per location**

Data collection tool	Place and number of people participated						
	<i>Egela</i>	<i>Sheraro</i>	<i>Aksum</i>	<i>Samre</i>	<i>Irob</i>	<i>Mekelle</i>	<i>Belgium/ Netherlands</i>
In-depth interview (n=29)	5	5*	-	6*	-	10	3
Focus group discussion (n=2FGD/n=2 participants)	1	-	1	-	-		
Key informant interview (n=3)	1	1	-	1	1		
Observation			X				

\* Denotes areas where under 18 children participated as respondents. Two in Sheraro, 15 and 17 years old as well as one 16-year-old in Samre participated as respondents with the consent of at-least either one of their available parents.

### ***Internal documents***

With regards to the internal documents from the European Commission, the following procedure was followed. The European Commission sent 45 documents in 2020 to a legal representative of the group Human Rights for Eritreans, who asked the researchers to analyse the information. The documentation was sent in response to a request for access to documents on the Eritrea Emergency Road Rehabilitation project funded by the European Union in Eritrea. The information was sent in three batches. The first two batches included improperly censored documents, which revealed further information. In addition to the documents sent by the EU, external documents were used to triangulate and add further information. These were analysed to ascertain the timeline of decisions.

### ***Data analysis***

A coding-labelling strategy was employed to analyse the data obtained from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. The data was first transcribed in Tigrinya, the language in which the interview and discussions were conducted. Then a summary of the translation to English was prepared on an Excel sheet for all the data obtained. A code was then assigned to the respondents based on the type of data collection tool.

The theme building process was reconsidered after brainstorming the transcribed data and again after the analysis of the data. The themes initially identified were then crosschecked against the data. Subthemes that contribute to the bigger themes were then identified. Finally, the data was analysed based on the coded themes and subthemes explained in the result section.

The research team collected the media data and selected speeches based on their relevance for the public agenda. Subsequently, the team conducted brainstorming reviews to understand the dominant frames reflected in the media content using thematic content analysis. After the third review of the media content, final thematic analysis

was presented in paraphrasing and using quotes together with the results of the in-depth interviews and key informant interviews.

**Table 2.3. Content themes**

No.	Themes	Type of data used
1	Problem definition (diagnostic framing)	Media data, IDIs and FGDs
2	Consensus and action mobilisation	FGDs and IDIs
4	Motivational framing	IDIs and FGDs
5	Solution (prognostic framing)	KIIs, IDIs and FGDs
6	Disinformation tactics	Media data and IDIs
7	Censorship	IDIs
8	Denial	IDIs, FGDs, KIIs and media data

The internal documents were analysed and the timeline of events identified; these were triangulated with the other data. The notes from the observations and field visits were used to crosscheck the other information gathered and on incidents captured through autobiographic notes. Both authors kept a diary during the war on events and reports , both of which were used for cross checking interpretations made from material collected and analysed.

**Results and findings**

The research aimed to explore the disinformation tactics used to conceal the involvement of the Eritrean Army in the Tigray war. Diagnostic, motivational, and prognostic frames of the media reports were compared with the actions of Eritrean soldiers during the Tigray war.

***14 January 2018: A warning: ‘Game over, Woyane’***

During an important speech on 14 January 2018, President Isayas laid the foundation of ‘the problem’, which he defined as the Tigray

People's Liberation Movement (TPLF) or 'Woyane'.<sup>3</sup> In framing of the TPLF as a problem, he went back to the history of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the TPLF. The EPLF is the predecessor of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), which has ruled Eritrea since 1994.

In his speech on 14 January 2018, President Isayas unequivocally identified the TPLF as the problem. In a series of statements, he explained why this is so. He argued that the TPLF had set up the organisation of the Ethiopian state based on ethnicity:

*[...] what the TPLF made was bringing ethnocentrism in organizational form.*  
(ERi-TV, 2018a, 1:09:48-1:11:05, translated from Tigrinya by authors)

President Isayas delegitimised the leadership of the TPLF (ERi-TV, 2020; 2018a):

*When we evaluate this trend after 25 years their attempt to divide and rule, Ethiopia could not able to step further. That is the reason that Ethiopians are now committed to dismantle the TPLF.* (ERi-TV, 2018a, 1:04:59-1:07:21, translated from Tigrinya by authors)

In this speech, Isayas also blamed the 'Woyane' for the problems that Eritrea has faced. He attributed the cause of the sanctions that the United Nations (UN) Security Council adopted on Eritrea in 2009 for alleged destabilisation of the region, arms trade, and other illegal practices to the 'Woyane':

*Woyane has this trend of fabricating information and accusing us as it did in 2009, which caused Eritrea to be sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council.*  
(ERi-TV, 2018a, 0:32:10-0:33:30, translated from Tigrinya by authors)

President Isayas said he would put a stop to this problem, introducing a new slogan: "Woyane, game over!" (ERi-TV, 2018a).

President Isayas stated that the rule of the TPLF leadership over Ethiopia was 'finished', referring to the 25-year period that TPLF had

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'Woyane' refers to the TPLF (and broadly to the people of Tigray), in relation to the victories against Emperor Selassie and the Derg regime. In Eritrea, the term 'Woyane' is changed into a derogatory and hostile term. In 2016 the slogan Down Down Woyane is introduced at an Oromo festival, as a hostile term towards the TPLF specifically and the people of Tigray in general.



been leading Ethiopia. The TPLF leader Meles Zenawi become the Prime Minister of Ethiopia in 1991 following the defeat of the Derg regime. Isayas gave a clear warning to the TPLF and anyone identifying as Tigrayan:

*Woyane this game can never return. Game Over! You can buy some time, you may get good care until your time is up, but the 25 years are gone, enough is enough. The global scenario is facing changing dynamisms. Woyane's attempt to divert the agenda through fabrications is never going to happen again.* (ERi-TV, 2018a, 0:21:54-0:27:24, translated by authors)

President Isayas then engaged the people of Ethiopia:

*Now the message to the people of Ethiopia ... is that this is the time that you need to say 'enough is enough'. The losses for 25 years provide good lessons. This is the right time to say no for Woyane and its guardians.* (ERi-TV, 2018a, 0:21:54-0:27:24, translated by authors)

He took the slogan 'enough is enough' from an opposition campaign originally directed against the Eritrean regime and reinterpreted it to support Ethiopians to bring an end to the 'TPLF/Woyane' regime.<sup>4</sup> He engaged with the Ethiopian agenda, as he defined it, and to justify this strong hostile scenario against the TPLF, he claimed the TPLF was supported by external agents:<sup>5</sup>

*Woyane betrayed the people of Eritrea who fought together in bitter days. Woyane collaborated with external forces to fight the very same people. That was an unforgivable one because it served as a foreign agent, working with external actors to dismantle Eritrea.* (ERi-TV, 2018a, 1:16:28-1:17:10, translated by authors)

The speech of January 2018 was forecasting events; in February 2018 Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigned and in March 2018 Abiy was appointed as Ethiopia's Prime Minister. Eritrean President

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<sup>4</sup> The slogan 'enough is enough' was originally introduced by the Eritrean opposition movement Yakl (which means 'enough') in 2016; the slogan was subsequently taken over by Isayas to confront the opposition 'enough is enough', which would become the slogan for a global campaign led by Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2021 against foreign interference.

<sup>5</sup> A claim that in fact has been levied against Isayas himself, who has been regularly accused of having been supported by the CIA as leader of the EPLF (Aleme, 1993; ተስፋንኪሌል, 1982; Resoum, 2008; Horn of Africa Research and Knowledge Platform, ND).

Isayas continued to repeat the ‘Game over, Woyane’ slogan in the media (ERi-TV 2018b).

The narrative against the ‘Woyane’ was further developed by President Isayas in a seminar in the Eritrean military training camp Sawa where he discussed with the graduates of the military training the “political cleansing” of “the leftovers of Woyane” (ERi-TV, 2018c). In this speech, President Isayas used diagnostic framing – identifying the problem as the ‘TPLF’ and ‘Woyane’. He also used prognostic framing, which identifies the proposed solution, which he offered in the form of a campaign of ‘Game over, Woyane’. He also set out the intention behind the proposed solution, which is referred to as motivational framing, and he identifies it to be the right time for a solution, given the dynamic changes in “global scenarios”, such that “This is the right time to say no for Woyane and its guardians” (ERi-TV, 2018a, 0:21:54-0:27:24, translated by authors). For Eritrean audiences, the message was crystal clear: the ‘Woyane’ were the problem, the international winds were changing and, therefore, it was time to end the TPLF (vaguely extended to mean all Tigrayans) in Ethiopia.

### ***Secret diplomacy on the future of the Assab port***

In 2009, the UN Security Council placed Eritrea under sanctions. President Isayas blamed the ‘Woyane’, the TPLF for this (ERi-TV, 2018a, 0:32:10-0:33:30). Seven years later, in 2016, the UN Security Council received a report from the UN Council on Human Rights by the UN Special Commission on Inquiry on Eritrea (2016), which determined that crimes against humanity had been committed in Eritrea.

The same year, 2016, the UN Security Council Monitoring Group documented “a significant evolution like the continuing military activities in and around Assab” (UN Monitoring Group, 2016, p. 10). The group noted that “the activities included the presence of non-Eritrean military personnel, new military equipment on the territory and the construction of new military infrastructure relating to air and naval capacity” (UN Monitoring Group, 2016, p, 10). It was indicated that the Assab port was used by Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Eritrea for the training and transport of equipment and

troops to Aden in the context of the conflict in Yemen (UN Monitoring Group, 2016, p. 12).

It is reported that an Israeli diplomat met Eritrean President Isayas in Asmara, and subsequently in Addis Ababa with President Hailemariam Desalegn of Ethiopia at the end of 2017, to discuss the future of the Assab port (Interviewee IDI2801, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 25 March 2024, Scheveningen). The meeting had been proposed by President Hailemariam Desalegn. Earlier, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had visited Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn, focusing, among other things, on Ethiopian support for Israel's request for observer status in the African Union as well as other regional matters (AA, 2016).

A one-person delegation travelled from Israel to Mekelle on 24 December 2017, to meet with high level officials in Mekelle (Interviewee IDI2701, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 3 April 2024, Antwerp). While the programme in Mekelle identified a proposal for research collaboration, the interviewees indicated that the key substance of debate was on a political proposal for resetting relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, including the port of Assab (Interviewee IDI2701, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 3 April 2024, Antwerp; interviewee IDI2702, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 25 March 2024, Scheveningen; interviewee IDI2801, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 25 March 2024, Scheveningen; interviewee IDI2801, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 17 April 2024, Brussels and e-mails copied to author, dated Wed, Dec 20, 2017, 13:17).<sup>6</sup> Eritrea was to offer Ethiopia use of the port of Assab, in exchange a settlement of the border dispute in Badme; additionally, the European Union (EU) would help to build roads from Assab to Addis Ababa with a connection to Mekelle. This would allow the hostile situation between Eritrea and Ethiopia to positively evolve into active collaboration between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Both countries would gain economically (Interviewee

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<sup>6</sup> The meeting that took place in Mekelle was confirmed by three persons who were present in the meeting and the authors also received evidence of the meeting, including emails and the meeting programme.

IDI2701, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 3 April 2024, Antwerp; interviewee IDI2702, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 25 March 2024, Scheveningen; interviewee IDI2801, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 25 March 2024, Scheveningen; interviewee IDI2801, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 17 April 2024, Brussels and e-mails copied to author, dated Wed, Dec 20, 2017, 13:17).

According to the three interviewees, the proposal was not well-received by the Tigray leadership. Three weeks later, on 14 January 2018, President Isayas gave his speech identifying the TPLF as a problem and presenting the slogan ‘Game over, Woyane’ in which he referenced that the geopolitical situation had been altered which, he said, made it “the right time” for the campaign against TPLF – and by extension, Tigrayans. This suggested that President Isayas was confident that the political momentum had moved in his favour.

The geopolitical circumstances had indeed changed. In 2012, Meles Zenawi, then Prime Minister of Ethiopia had passed away. He was succeeded by Hailemariam Desalegn from the Ethiopian regional state of South Nations Nationalities and People. President Isayas of Eritrea was also seriously ill in 2012, with repeated rumours that he had also died. This subsequently proved to be untrue.

In 2015, the UAE changed its use of the port in Djibouti to the Eritrean port of Assab, which offered Eritrea an opportunity to develop the port with the help of the UAE. The UAE signed a lease contract for 30 years.

With the Trump administration having come to power in the United States of America in 2016, the landscape evolved further, ultimately culminating in the Abraham Accords of 2020, improving collaboration between the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, sponsored by the United States (US). If there was a peace plan proposed to Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2017 to give Ethiopia access to the sea and unlock Eritrea from the sanctions that had severely isolated it, then this would certainly fit the description that Isayas gave in his January 2018 interview: the geopolitical winds had changed.

The proposal offered in 2017 by Israeli’s diplomacy to Eritrea and Ethiopia was accompanied by offers of European support. After the

secret peace deal was concluded in July 2018 with financial support offered by the UAE and Saudi Arabia to Eritrea and Ethiopia, the European Union offered road-building projects to Eritrea. A media message identified the plan to build up the port in Eritrea in collaboration with Ethiopia in July 2018:

*Eritrea has announced plans to capitalise on its recent peace treaty with Ethiopia by building a port to export potassium.* (Global Construction Review, 2018)

Planning for the EU-road building project in Eritrea started prior to the announcement in February 2019. With an initial EUR 20 million budget; this was later expanded with an additional EUR 60 million budget for subsequent phases. In the records sent by the EU to the authors in response to information requests, it can be ascertained that the earliest meetings with the implementing partner, the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), were between 25–30 November 2018. UNOPS is among the UN agencies under the Financial and Administrative Agreement (FAFA) with a special arrangement, including a “pass-through arrangement”, where funds are mingled and given in trust to an agency.<sup>7</sup>

Around the same time, a high-level representative of the EU, Managing Director for Africa at the European Union’s External Action Service (EEAS). Koen Vervaeke, met with Senior Presidential Advisor, Yemane Gebreab (AfricaNews, 2019). Vervaeke Tweeted about this on 27 November 2018 (@koen\_vervaekeEU, 27 November 2018). The references to the EU in all its internal documentation refer to the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea as a reason for rapidly accelerating its support.

On 11 December 2018, the EU delegation in Asmara wrote a letter to Mr Hagos Ghebrehiewot, Head of Economic Affairs at the Red Sea Corporation,<sup>8</sup> which confirmed that a project action document

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<sup>7</sup> This modality is explained in a UN document (UNSDG, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> The name on the letter was censored, but the information could be recovered. The Red Sea Corporation has been described in reports by the UN Monitoring Group and associated with illegal international trade, under the control of the PFDJ. In 2015, the UN Monitoring Group investigated the Red Sea Corporation in relation to a vessel docked in Massawa port with weapons on the way to an arms

for road building had been drafted, following a conversation between the EU, Hagos and Senior Presidential Advisor, Yemane Gebreab. The letter did not mention the date of the meeting. The letter was signed by Nicole Miller, Chargé d’Affaires.<sup>9</sup>

On 8 February 2019, Eritrean Press announced that EU Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, Neven Mimica, was visiting Eritrea for the launch of a EUR 20 million road building project (Eritrean Press, 2019). In the message, the project was connected to the recent peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and it indicates that this is the first phase of broader support to Eritrea to rehabilitate road connections between the Ethiopian border and Eritrean ports. Mimica met directly with Eritrean President Isayas. The same day, the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa also published information about the project, stating it was part of a “new dual track approach of strengthening political dialogue with Eritrea” (European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, 2019a). It specified that the focus of the project was connecting the Eritrean port of Massawa (not Assab). The road projects would connect Asmara to the border with Tigray.

As becomes apparent from the documentation received from the EU regarding the project, the action fiche for the project was approved on 31 January 2019. The e-mail between the EU and member states says that several countries raised concerns, particularly related to the people who would work on the road building project, especially those in the National Service. The poor remuneration and working conditions under the National Service conditions, which is indefinite, were referenced, which the UN had identified as a crime against humanity (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2016).

The project was discussed in a meeting on 24 January 2019, in the presence of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and United

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exhibition in the UAE. In 2021, the Red Sea Corporation was put on the sanctions list of the US Treasury. For a detailed description, see Makeda Saba, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Idem.

Kingdom, as well as DEVCO and EEAS. The project was introduced as a key opportunity to “consolidate peace, open up economic integration and support Eritrea’s economic development” in the wake of the peace agreement of July 2018 (European Commission, 2019). The EU’s poorly censored minutes of the meeting revealed that the project should be implemented “rapidly, otherwise Eritrea would look elsewhere” (European Commission, 2019). The minutes explained that the project was in essence an “emergency procurement project”, which transfers funds from the European Development Fund (EDF) to the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), “to benefit from its emergency procedures”.

The documentation specified that the work on the roads was to be carried out by people in Eritrea’s permanent National Service, as there is “no way round this”. The minutes mentioned that the European Commission suggested using only demobilised workers, but in a part that was poorly censored by the EU, it could be read that “this was rejected, given the situation and [Eritrea’s] opposition to conditionality”. The Commission also claimed that labour laws in Eritrea were broadly applied and that National Service workers received salary comparable to salaries in Ethiopia. The meeting minutes also mentioned cooperation with Ethiopia, including the Prime Minister, and it referred to a visit with the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, but does not include the date of this visit.

The meeting minutes mentioned that UNOPS, working with the Eritrean government, would implement the project. The Red Sea Trading Company had to be used for procurement, although international procurement would be done jointly, the minutes stated. The action fiche for the project tried to cover the EU’s role by specifying that the delivery of the work and labour costs will be paid for solely by the Eritrean government (European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, 2019a, p.1).

The three main road sections that the action fiche mentioned as part of the rehabilitation were:

*Road section 1, Nefasit-Dekembare-Senafe-Zelembesa, which is the main route down to Adigrat and Mekelle in Tigray. [...] Road Section 2: Dekembare-Tera Imni-Mendefera-Adi Kuala, which is the fastest route down to Adva and accessing*

*Amhara. [...] Road Section 3: Mendefera-Barentu, which is planned to be connected after Tesseney towards the border with Sudan (and on to Kassala) and Ethiopia (from the border at Humera).* (European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, 2019a, p.2)

The action fiche stated that the government, the EU and UNOPS made a joint visit on road section one (date unknown) and that the work had already started. The fiche also mentioned that augmenting the capacities at Massawa port were being explored as a next step. “This is being explored with Gulf partners” (European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, 2019a, p.4).

The road building project faced criticism from the media and was the target of a court case by an Eritrean human rights foundation (Euractiv, 2020). It was heavily criticised in the European Parliament. In June 2020, the EU made it clear that it was taking a “no more roads” approach and had denied additional funding requested by Eritrea for road building (European Parliament, 2020). The funding was completely withdrawn in April 2021, as the EU cited a lack of interest from Eritrea and the presence of Eritrean troops in Tigray as the main reasons (Devex, 2021). The EU stated that EUR 19 million had been disbursed.

In March 2019, during the French President’s visit, a defence cooperation agreement was signed, establishing a legal framework for the deployment of French troops to Ethiopia and vice versa. Additionally, France committed to assisting in the reconstruction of Ethiopia’s navy.

**A defence cooperation agreement was signed in March 2019 during the French President's visit, providing a legal framework for sending French troops to Ethiopia and vice versa. Furthermore, France has undertaken to support the reconstruction of an Ethiopian navy.**



Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères

<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr> > ... > Ethiopia



**France and Ethiopia - Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs**



**Figure 2.3. Screenshot Google Search (key words: ‘France’ ‘support’ ‘Ethiopia’ ‘navy’ ‘2019’) performed on 8 September 2024<sup>10</sup>**

The purpose of the diplomacy, involving a range of international diplomatic efforts, was not revealed. It may explain that the statement of President Isayas, that the international winds had changed, as he said on 14 January 2018, encompassed more than a grain of truth.

***Secret diplomatic deals on peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia***

An analysis of the critical events that shifted the international momentum, shows critical decisions associated with the following aspirations towards a deal:

- Integration (discussed in various ways) of Eritrea and Ethiopia
- Ethiopia’s access to a port in Eritrea
- Removing the isolation of Eritrea, with external support to Eritrea and Ethiopia, in an alliance with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, the US, and the EU
- Providing support for the building of port, road, and naval infrastructure

There are three important observations to make on these aspirations. The first is that information any deals regarding these aspirations is scantily available, if at all, and that most deals seem to have been handled through silent diplomacy. The second observation is that all the elements came together around the idea of a peace deal between Eritrea and Ethiopia, supported by various incentives, with heavy emphasis on the port and road infrastructure. The third observation is that there was little if any, concern given to what this would mean for the Tigray region of Ethiopia, which shares a 1,000 km long

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<sup>10</sup> url: <https://www.diplomatique.gouv.fr/en/country-files/ethiopia/france-and-ethiopia-65128/#:~:text=A%20defence%20cooperation%20agreement%20was,reconstruction%20of%20an%20Ethiopian%20navy>. On the search date the url was not or no longer available to open.

border with Eritrea and which has a history of contention with Eritrea.

No information was made publicly available of the secret deal, if it existed. The content of the final Peace Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, signed in July 2018, has also remained secret.

Immediately following the signing of the Peace Agreement, President Isayas hinted heavily at the prospect of Eritrea and Ethiopia being connected, without explicitly mentioning the issue of access to a port, in his speech made at the Ethiopian Presidential Palace, when he visited Ethiopia following the signing of the peace deal (FBC, 2018). A month after the Peace Agreement was signed in July 2018, Prime Minister Abiy and President Isayas visited the port of Assab in Eritrea, an indicator that access to the port was part of the agreement (Awate, 2018). The need for road reconstruction to make the port accessible was emphasised (Awate, 2018).

In a speech held on 14 July 2018, President Isayas built on the narrative that Eritrea and Ethiopia were ‘one’:

*The recurring peace and love between the people of Eritrea and Ethiopia is not new rather we are reinstating it as both people have common historical and cultural values intertwined as one. I as an individual not as a President, getting [leader] like Dr Abiy is not easy: the opportunity that the people of Eritrea and Ethiopia have in common is tremendous. I have said this repeatedly; for anything that needs representation you will be representing us both [for Ethiopia and Eritrea]. You will be leading us ahead. It is neither for the sake of lip service nor to make him happy. I genuinely rely on you that the peace and friendship initiative of both people will be advanced to our development programs which the aspiration of the one people is not different than the other. For this to be achieved, Dr Abiy is here to lead us forward. He came to Asmara; we came to Addis Ababa and now to Hawassa this is only the beginning. As he [PM Abiy] mentioned it earlier, I will not need his permission to travel across every corner of Ethiopia. I don't need any permission from Dr Abiy to visit wherever I want. The same is true, he will not need my permission to go wherever he wants whether it is Massawa, Assab, Ombajer or Teseney. We can speak that this love, peace, and unity between both people is historical. But we lost it in due course; now we regained it. We are moving forward with assured leadership commitment. Although there is nothing above the people for the people to thrive, leadership is vital. In this occasion today, I announce to the people of Hawassa that*

*I have handed over the entire authority and leadership role to him. I am confident that he will win. Congratulations to all of us.* (President Isayas in Hawassa, EBC, 2018, 8:29-11:44, emphasis added)

Four months after the signing of the Peace Agreement in July 2018, the UN sanctions against Eritrea were lifted, thanks to Ethiopian diplomacy. Prime Minister Abiy of Ethiopia received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2019.

Eritrea was finally saved from isolation by the international community. Meanwhile, pressure on the Tigray region mounted (Gebreslassie & Van Reisen, 2024), resulting in the war in Tigray, which started on the eve of the American presidential elections on 3 November 2020, when all eyes were on the United States (ICHREE, 2023). At the same time, Eritrean soldiers entered Tigray (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a). On 4 November, Prime Minister Abiy formally announced a law enforcement operation against Tigray. At the beginning of the war, Eritrean soldiers shelled Humera on 9 November 2020 (Human Rights Watch, 2021a) and massacred civilians in Zalambesa (13 November 2020) (Reuters, 2021). On 16 November the Tigray Central Command Spokesperson Getachew Reda stated on Twitter that the UAE had carried out a drone attack from Assab port on Tigray. Tigray regional President Debretsion announced that Eritrea was involved in the war. In retaliation, the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) fired missiles on Asmara (Parevicini, 2020).

The involvement of Eritrea in the war was denied by Eritrea and Ethiopia as well as international actors, such as the US, UN and African Union (AU). The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and Chairperson of the African Union Commission Moussa Faki Mahamat delivered a joint press conference on 9 December 2020. Guterres said “There is no proof of Eritrean troops inside Ethiopia, where government forces are fighting rebels in the northernmost region of Tigray” (Xinhua, 2020). United States Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo during the Trump administration, which had lost the election in November 2020 (but were still in power until the following January 2021), said that the United States strongly condemned the attack carried out by the TPLF on the airport in

Asmara, Eritrea, on 14 November 2020. It added that the US government appreciated “Eritrea’s restraint, which has helped prevent further spreading of the conflict” (US Embassy in Ethiopia, 2020).

The events as they unfolded, in any case, seem to reflect well with what President Isayas referred to as changing international circumstances: he could count on international support that had not been available since the 2009 UN sanctions. In contrast, the Tigray leadership could no longer count on the support of key international actors. For President Isayas, this was a time-bound window to change the public agenda.

It is noteworthy that following the signing of the Pretoria Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities in 2022, the relations between President Isayas and Prime Minister Abiy soured, and that Prime Minister Abiy subsequently demanded access to the port of Assab. If it is true that the access to the port of Assab was part of the secret deal and secret Peace Agreement, it would explain why he made this claim so adamantly.

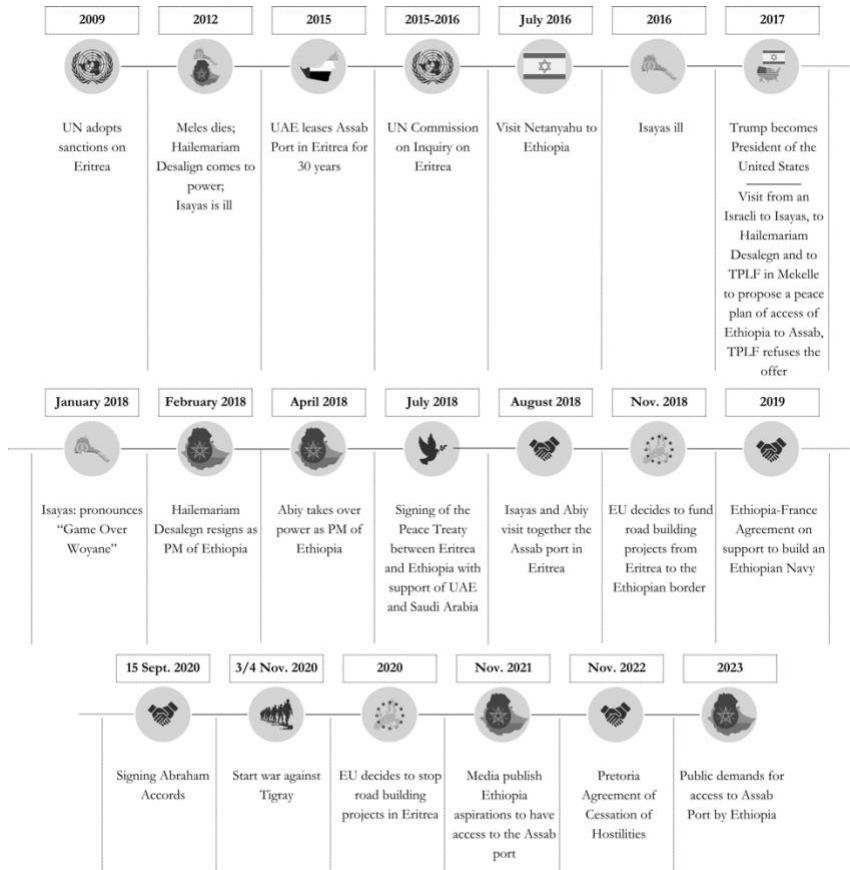


Figure 2.4. Eritrea-Ethiopia relations since 2009

***Disinformation tactics: Denial of Eritrean involvement in Tigray***

Africa News headline on 11 December 2020: “‘Complete lie’: Ethiopia denies Eritrean Army’s involvement in Tigray”. However, on the same day “Exclusive – U.S. says reports of Eritrean troops in Ethiopia’s Tigray are credible”, printed Reuters on 11 December 2020 (Stewart, 2020).

Eritrea’s involvement in the Tigray war was among the most seriously contested issues in the media narratives for months after the war began. Ethiopia and Eritrea both denied that Eritrea, and other external actors, were involved in the conflict, framing it as an internal conflict (EBC, 2020). Eritrea’s Foreign Affairs Minister, Osman

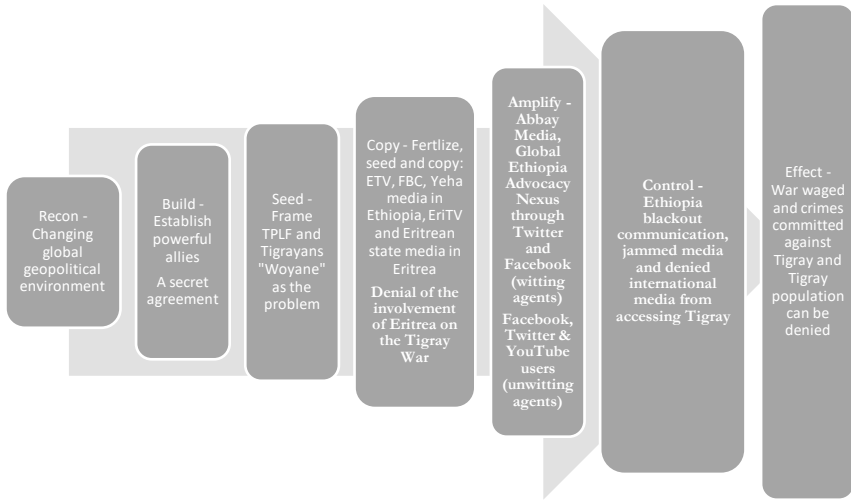
Saleh, vehemently denied the involvement of Eritrea. He was quoted as saying: “we are not part of the conflict” (Paravicini, 2020). The then Ethiopia Minister of Defence, Kenea Yadeta, stated that the claims raised by Tigray alleging Eritrea’s participation in the conflict was: “disinformation and fabrication” (Africa News, 2020).

Deutsche Welle’s Conflict Zone host Sarah Kelly confronted Ethiopia’s Minister of Democratisation, Zadig Abraha, on 16 December 2020, in relation to who was involved in the war. Zadig said:

*We are more than capable of dealing with the TPLF. It is an insult to our military establishment to say that we are depending on the help of the Eritrean Army. I can assure you 100% times, 1001% times, there are no Eritrean armies operating in Tigray right now.* (Kelly, 2020)

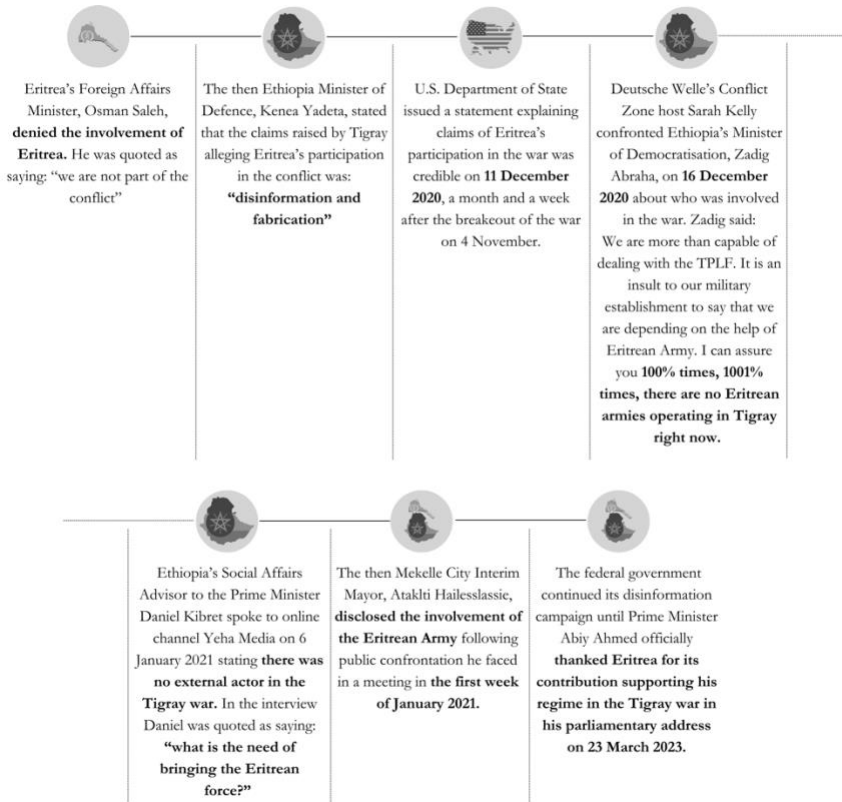
Ethiopia’s Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, Daniel Kibret, spoke to the online channel Yeha Media on 6 January 2021 claiming there was no external actor in the Tigray war. In the interview Daniel was quoted as saying: “what is the need of bringing the Eritrean force?”, saying that Ethiopia has enough capability to deal with its internal issue (Yeha Media 2021). The interview was televised through Abbay Media.

As a result, the involvement of Eritrea was obscured, at least for a month, until the US Department of State issued a statement explaining that Eritrea’s participation in the war was credible on 11 December 2020, a month and a week after the breakout of the war on 3 November. Even then, Eritrea and Ethiopia continued to deny the involvement of Eritrea, creating confusion and a situation in which no sense of ‘truth’ could be established.



**Figure 2.5. Disinformation kill chain used to conceal the involvement of Eritrea in the Tigray war**

The then Mekelle City Interim Mayor, Ataklti Hailelassie, appointed by the Ethiopian government after the invasion, disclosed the involvement of the Eritrean Army following a public confrontation that he faced in a meeting in the first week of January 2021 (Fana, 2021). The federal Ethiopian government continued its disinformation campaign until Prime Minister Abiy officially thanked Eritrea for its contribution to supporting his regime in the Tigray war in his parliamentary address on 23 March 2023 (EBC, 2021b). Figure 2.5 shows the chain of disinformation used to obscure the involvement of Eritrea in the Tigray war.



**Figure 2.6. Denial of the Eritrean involvement in the Tigray war: timeline**

The threat actors for the disinformation campaigns denying the participation of Eritrea in the Tigray war up to 23 March 2021 were the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments with diplomatic support from the African Union Commission, the UN, and the US.

The witting agents that facilitated these disinformation campaigns were the state media in Ethiopia (including ETV (formerly EBC), Addis Media Network (AMN), Amhara Media Corporation (AMC), and Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN), as well as other ruling party affiliated Fana Broadcasting Corporate (FBC) and Walta Television. Private media like Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) and Abbay Media, as well as diaspora-based sympathiser Global Ethiopia Advocacy Nexus and Eritrea state media channels and social media, spread these disinformation campaigns. Total communication



blackout, jamming of local media, obstructing the international media from accessing Tigray, censorship and intimidation of journalists allowed the Ethiopian media to keep framing the Tigray war as an internal conflict, denying the involvement of external actors. The YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter pages of the government and its supporters abroad contributed to the dissemination of the disinformation.

The Eritrean campaign emerged openly after the public announcement by PM Abiy of the involvement of Eritrea in the war. Figure 2.7 identifies seven dots of Eritrean accounts and seven dots of Ethiopian accounts, showing the overlap between them.

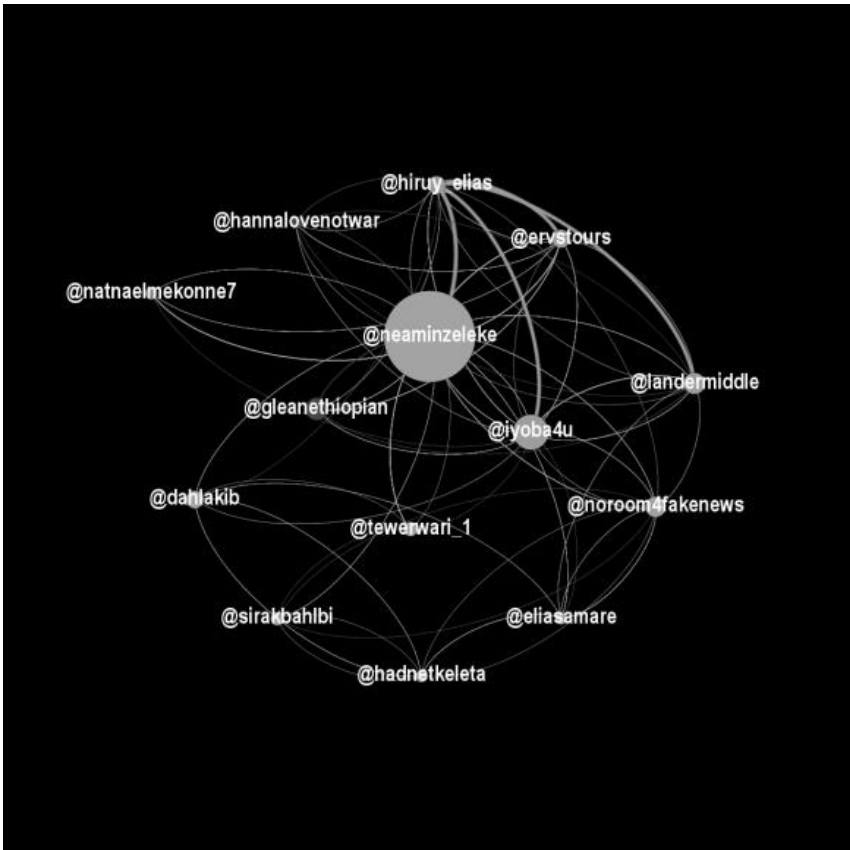


Figure 2.7. Influential Twitter accounts by Wilmot, C., Tveteraas, E., & Drew, A. (2021)

Many of the Eritrean accounts are prominent Eritrean government (PFDJ) accounts. Media in Eritrea cannot be considered independent from the government (Wilmot, C., Tveteraas, E., & Drew, A., 2021), August 20). The Ethiopian, Eritrean and Tigray diaspora were organised in information campaigns on social media to try and get messages across to international audiences.

As part of the disinformation campaign, journalists working in local media organisations administered by the interim government faced intimidation including persecution of journalists writing on the atrocities committed by the Eritrean Army, sexual violence and starvation in Tigray, and any reporting of the Eritrean involvement in the Tigray war (Al Jazeera, 2021; Reporters without Borders, 2021). Reporters Without Borders (2021) highlights the arbitrary detention of at least four journalists in Ethiopia. Among them is Kibrom Worku, head of news at Ahadu radio and TV, who was in police custody since 26 October 2021, despite a court order for his release on 12 November 2021. Eyasped Tesfaye, of the Ubuntu YouTube news channel, was arrested on 8 December 2021, while Mohammed Meaza, co-founder of the Roha news website, and Tamirat Negera, director of Terrara media outlet, have been detained since 10 December 2021. The police also raided Negera's home, confiscating his equipment, and his current location remains unknown. (Reporters without Borders, 2021). The Committee to Protect Journalists (2021) reported that unidentified armed men ransack home of Ethiopian journalist Lucy Kassa, to question her about her coverage of the Tigray war.

Since the onset of the civil war, dozens of journalists have been detained arbitrarily for extended periods, though many were released without charges. Media outlets faced significant challenges, with some being suspended or forced to reduce coverage of the war due to threats and harassment. For instance, the Awlo Media Center suspended operations in October. Additionally, Simon Marks, a New York Times journalist, was expelled from Ethiopia in May after losing his accreditation for alleged bias and spreading "fake news" (Reporters without Borders, 2021).

The unwitting agents were those who supported this disinformation campaign, being misinformed by the ruling government proponents,

joining in demonstrations organised by governments (such as the ‘No More’ campaign) and sharing disinformation content through their social media platforms. These disinformation campaigns were supported by bureaucratic approaches including imposing a total communication blackout in Tigray, jamming local media, and denying international media access to Tigray. The effect of these disinformation campaigns resulted in the denial of the engagement of Eritrea in the war and of the crimes allegedly committed. There was confusion, and little proof.

### ***Perception of events by the Tigrayan population under siege***

How did the population in Tigray perceive the events as they unfolded? An interviewee in Sheraro in Tigray with a Tigrayan person whose son was kidnapped by the Eritrean Army – who had still not returned at the time of the interview – spoke to the confusion around the Peace Agreement and what she perceived as the objective, to lift the UN sanctions on Eritrea. She said:

*We were grateful for the reconciliation between Ethiopia and Eritrea; and equally for the Nobel Peace Prize Committee that earned Abiy Ahmed the Peace Prize in 2019. But the prize served as a face-saving symbol to lift the sanctions on Eritrea. It didn't wait beyond a year for the Tigray war to break.* (Interviewee SHIDI06, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 4 June 2023)

Another interviewee, who used to live in Gerhu Sirnay in the vicinity of Semhal in Egela woreda, which is still today under occupation by Eritrea, also discussed the Peace Agreement as follows:

*Both the signatories to the peace agreement didn't declare that their agreement was cut and short-lived for war, and erupted in the areas where it was claimed that issues were solved by the agreement. An agreement of peace that continues straight into war must be questioned: was it an agreement of war or peace?* (Interviewee GSIDI05, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023)

The focus group discussants also noted that the peace narratives served to mobilise support against the common enemy, Tigray, where the President of Eritrea, Isayas , officially uttered ‘Woyane...game over’, fuelling the spread hate speech against ethnic Tigrayans by supporters of the federal government of Ethiopia (Interviewee

AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).

However, the respondents remembered that critical questions demanding the practicality of the peace process at the grassroots level were raised from Tigray (Interviewee SMIDI14, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). An in-depth interviewee with an internally displaced person (IDP) from Ziban Guila, a place in the vicinity of Egela, who used to live in Gerhu Sirnay, for his farmland was in the Cheare locality, which is still occupied by Eritrea, said:

*Four years into the peace process, Ethiopia has become a fragile state which was even listed among the top of the failed states in the world with high investment in military, hosting the bloodiest war since the world wars, resulting in gross human rights violations-which is what Eritrea had been through for years and still is. That means, the real goal of the so-called peace was the destabilisation of Ethiopia to the level of Eritrea, and not peace. (Interviewee GSIDI04, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023)*

According to the respondents the Ethio-Eritrea peace, facilitated the lifting of sanctions on Eritrea which resulted in the regeneration of the massive destabilisation role that Eritrea has played in the region – which the sanctions had aimed to prevent (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).

### ***Witnesses report on Eritrea's participation in the war***

After the start of the war on 3 November 2020 (ICHREE, 2023), Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers killed, arrested, and tortured civilians in Aksum (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024). They looted public and private resources including Aksum University from 19–27 November 2020, according to the focus group discussants (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). The Eritrean soldiers in Aksum separately continued looting money, jewellery and smart phones, searching house to house. The soldiers were raping adolescent girls as well as killing civilians (approximately 100 civilians were killed by shelling and indiscriminate killing including a university lecturer – most of whom were killed by the Eritrean Army) (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).

One of the participants remembered:

*On 27 November 2020 in the midday, three trucks of EDF soldiers came to Aksum positioning themselves around Anbesa Lavajo (entry route from Adwa to Aksum), Negisa Hotel and St Mary Church respectively. The city was overwhelmed by their movement. (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)*

Another participant in the focus group discussion stated:

*As the following day was St Gabriel religious celebration day, many people already reached the St Mary Church of Aksum in the early morning; but sudden frequent clash exchange was heard from the hills in May Kobo, where Eritrean soldiers had entrenched for a week already. Some of the people were targeted from the top of the hill while trying to rush to their house while others who kept silent in the compound of the church were also targeted later. (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)*

This participant herself witnessed the following:

*The bodies of above 25 people who wore a netsela, [a white cloth which Christians wear while going to church], laid down from the edge of the St Marry Church to her home around Sabean Hotel. The clash then continued until around 3:30 pm Local Time. Then after, the Eritrean soldiers went down to the houses nearing the hill through St Mikeal Church, Sabean Hotel and Daero Piasa. (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)*

One of the discussants who survived the Aksum Massacre stated:

*As the fighting was moderately slowed down, the Eritrean soldiers immediately began house to house search. I was frightened because I was hearing a sound of fire guns in the house they entered before ours. The sister of one of the victims opened the door as soon as they yelled: 'Agame [a slur for Tigrayan people used by Eritreans] open the house'. The oldest soldier, out of the three entered, ordered all men to lay down on the ground yelling 'we don't want to waste gun fire for Agame'. The two of them were counting the number of youth they shot. The oldest of them said 'I had 23; the second said I had 18 while the third responded 11'. Then the oldest one ordered the youngest soldier to shoot us all. (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)*

‘Agame’ is a derogatory term for Tigrayans, a term used by Eritreans when referring to people from Tigray they consider to be less worthy. A survivor of the massacre explained the situation:

*I was shot in my leg, while the other survivor on his hand; but the three others died immediately as they were shot repeatedly. A sister of the one who died grabbed the oldest soldier and begged them to kill her too while they were leaving the house. But he responded ‘you will give birth for us after we eradicate the Agame junta’.* (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)

Another survivor who escaped by hiding on the roof of his house witnessed the massacre of six people, four of them were children under 18, including his son (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). He said:

*Searching every house in our compound one of the soldiers said ‘we came to slaughter every Agame’ ordering the youth to go out to the compound. The one who shot all of the men in the compound ordering them to lay on the ground, said ‘Agame, you locked us behind for 30 years, now it is our turn to drag you back 100 years if we couldn’t deracinate you all’ and he said ‘game over’.* (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)

The utterances of Eritrean soldiers that they intended “to bring Tigray back” fifty or hundred years “into time” was also communicated in witness reports from Adigrat (communication to Van Reisen, WhatsApp, audiotape, 16 January 2024).

One of the participants indicated that the Eritrean soldiers continued the house-to-house search on 29 November 2020 where they captured him and around two hundred other youths, ordering them to travel barefoot through the breakers of glass of the Brana Hotel which Eritrean soldiers had demolished using tanks (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). The discussants also stated that they were denied a chance to bury the bodies of their children and relatives for three days (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). One woman said:

*Eritrean soldiers ordered that anyone who attempted to take bodies would be slaughtered. Around Sabeen Hotel alone I have counted 37 bodies. Then on the*

*third day, people began collecting bodies. But the vulture kettles were already popular around these days. The St Mary celebration then turned a funeral in which everyone cried for each other. Relentless to disinform, the Ethiopian media then reported Aksum dwellers celebrated St Mary of Zion Day.* (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)

The discussants explained that in their eyes, Eritrea had perpetrated ethnic cleansing against Tigrayans, a plan which they believe had been explained on television by President Isayas when people were focused on the Peace Agreement (Interviewee GSF02, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023; interviewee SHIDI11, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). Respondents argued that Eritrea was among the main designers of the Tigray war, as Eritrea had mobilised and even trained Somali soldiers to engage in the war in Tigray (AXFGD01, a focus group interview with DT, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).

However, the respondents felt that international actors did not treat the involvement of Eritrea from the perspective of aggression and invasion (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). The international policy actors focused on peace, but while doing so, failed to address the destabilising role of Eritrea in Tigray and in the Horn of Africa in-general (Interviewee GSIDI01, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023; interviewee SMIDI15, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023; interviewee GSF02, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023).

Referring to Tigrayans as ‘junta’, including Tigrayans as collectively responsible for the situation in Eritrea, the Tigray population was subjected to a so-called retaliation. A 17-year-old who was kidnapped by Eritrean soldiers on 11 September 2021 (which is the Geez New Year celebration) from her home in Sheraro was told that being Tigrayan was enough for her to be subjected to the violence perpetrated on her. She said:

*As I was taken through Badme to Shambuko along with 46 other adolescent girls and women as well as 405 men all below 18 years old except 16 elders, they used to beat, harass and gang-rape me. When I asked them why to put all this suffering on me, they responded ‘you Agame, Tigrayan shut up, your game is over Ms. Junta now*

*ours starts'. They used to claim Tigray for all they do not have. They even said 'this suffering is small in comparison to the way you Agame locked us for 30 years. (Interviewee SHIDI10, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 6 June 2023)*

Many children and a few elders were kidnapped by the Eritrean Army from Sheraro and were first taken to Shambuko, then finally, they were imprisoned in Adi-Beara for a month and 17 days (Interviewee SHIDI10, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 6 June 2023; interviewee SHIDI09, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 6 June 2023). Another child, aged 15, who was kidnapped from a field where he was rearing cattle on the outskirts of Sheraro on 11 September 2021, stated that he was arrested and pummelled by the Intelligence Unit of the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) in Barentu Town. He said:

*The place where I was arrested along with 4 children of my village for 11 months is called "Enda Sleya Mahyur" [literally translated as Intelligence's Arrest Room]. We found ten people who were arrested before us. The soldiers usually told us that 'the destiny of Agame men is to be slaughtered in the hand of Eritrean men while Agame women must give birth to an Eritrean child who takes his father's role'. Out of the total of 15 men, most of us children, in the room I was arrested, the Intelligence Unit took the five men and they didn't return until I was released after 11 months. Among them, I know two. (Interviewee SHIDI09, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 6 June 2023)*

Since he came back to Sheraro in August 2022, he said he was still confused as to what to tell his parents and usually hid from them. He added "Explaining what happened to them is expected from me; but what should I say" he questioned "Though it was unlikely, I wanted to hope that they were alive" (Interviewee SHIDI09, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 6 June 2023).

The atrocities committed by Eritrea were hidden by a siege and communication black out, together with a disinformation campaign, and atrocities were committed with impunity. The failure to recognise Eritrea as a principal actor in the conflict, will continue to conceal the atrocities committed in Tigray, parts of which Eritrea continues to occupy, despite the signing of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement on 2 November 2022 (Omer, 2022; Hochet-Baudin, 2022; Bariyo, 2023: Samuel, 2023).



## Conclusion

The chapter explored the secret lead-up to the 2018 Peace Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2017 and 2018, revealing a disinformation campaign that used the peace process as a cover for preparations for war against Tigray. The collaboration between Eritrea and Ethiopia was concealed, allowing Eritrea to commit atrocities in Tigray with impunity. Eritrea's active presence was only officially acknowledged on 23 March 2021, when Prime Minister Abiy thanked President Isayas for the Eritrean involvement and battlefield support to the war.

In late 2017, an Israeli diplomat visited the region to advance an Ethiopia-Eritrea peace plan, offering Ethiopia access to the strategically located Assab port in Eritrea and support for Eritrean infrastructure development. The TPLF rejected the plan. Shortly afterwards Eritrean President Isayas made a threatening statement towards Tigray. Abiy became Prime Minister in early 2018 and, by July, Ethiopia and Eritrea signed a peace treaty with support from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the US, leading to the lifting of UN sanctions against Eritrea. Prime Minister Abiy received the Nobel Peace Prize for these efforts in 2019.

European and French support for infrastructure and military development followed (including naval support), with President Isayas indicating that he had handed over significant authority to Prime Minister Abiy. The details of the peace plan remained undisclosed. Meanwhile, President Isayas framed the TPLF and Tigrayans as the problem, using derogatory terms such as 'Woyane'. While the international public agenda was fully framed on peace, a language of war against Tigray was introduced by the leaders in the region. The supposed peace process masked the formation of a war alliance against Tigray.

During the Tigray war, Ethiopia and Eritrea employed disinformation tactics to deny Eritrea's involvement, while Eritrean soldiers committed atrocities in Tigray against Tigrayan civilians. The disinformation campaign to conceal their presence included a communication blackout, media censorship, and the intimidation of journalists. Ethiopian and Eritrean media and social media denied

Eritrea's involvement, framing the conflict as internal. The disinformation campaign was supported by pro-government diaspora groups of all sides.

Journalists in the local media faced intimidation to prevent them from reporting on Eritrea's involvement and the atrocities committed. This repression continued after Eritrea's involvement was revealed, making it difficult to investigate the situation on the ground. This disinformation campaign confused the public about the nature and severity of the conflict, leaving atrocities unreported and perpetrators unpunished. The result was a tragic confusion of war with peacebuilding, leading to long-lasting instability and impunity for those responsible for the atrocities.

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## **Authors' contributions**

This work has been carried out as part of a PhD study of Daniel Tesfa, who put together the first version of this chapter. Daniel Tesfa provided the theoretical considerations for this chapter. Daniel Tesfa collected primary data for this chapter and analysed them. Mirjam Van Reisen advised on the approach to documenting the arguments presented in the chapter, she reviewed all of the versions, she restructured the text and she offered new empirical material, in order to support the empirical evidence presented. This empirical material was analysed by Daniel Tesfa. Kai Smits added the section on the road-building programme in Eritrea. Daniel Tesfa reviewed all the material and finalised the revision of the chapter.

## **Ethical clearance**

This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC 2020.139 titled “Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting”.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the ‘Note on content and editorial decisions’.

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