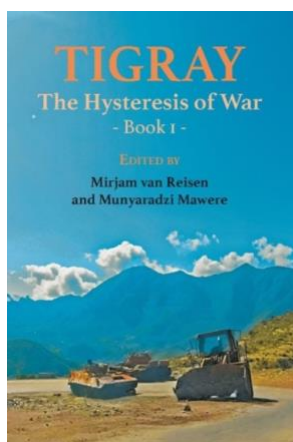


Regional War by Design: The Involvement of Eritrea in the Tigray War

Daniel Tesfa & Mirjam Van Reisen

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Daniel Tesfa & Mirjam Van Reisen

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Those who establish friendships with their enemy will be ashamed over time.

Abstract

This research examines Eritrea's involvement in the Tigray conflict, which was initially denied by both Eritrean and Ethiopian leaders, with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed eventually acknowledging Eritrea's role in a speech to the Ethiopian Parliament on 23 March 2021. The study draws on interviews with 50 individuals, including residents of border areas, to explore the historical and phenomenological tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia, with a focus on Tigray. The conflict is rooted in statehood disputes, contrasting Eritrean nationalism, shaped by Italian colonial influence, with Tigray's ethnic and Aksumite heritage. The findings suggest Eritrea's ambition to dominate the Horn of Africa by intervening in Ethiopian and regional matters. Following Eritrea's independence in 1993, an initial peace was disrupted by the 1998–2000 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. According to interviewees, the Tigray conflict reflects unresolved issues, with Eritrea reacting to its political and economic isolation. Military coordination between Eritrea and Ethiopia, including transports by Ethiopian Airlines, facilitated attacks on Tigray. Despite international oversight regarding the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement between Ethiopia and Tigray (2022), Eritrea continues to occupy Tigrayan regions. This research underscores the potential for grassroots peace initiatives among border communities, which have shared socio-economic and cultural ties.

Key words: Tigray war, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Eritrea-Ethiopia Peace Agreement

Introduction

For the first five months of the war in Tigray, Eritrea's participation was hidden (EEPA, 2020a, 2020b; Wrong, 2023). After the presence of the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) was confirmed by international actors, the federal authorities in Ethiopia said that the Eritrean army had been 'invited' to fight against Tigray and, as such, was not violating Ethiopia's sovereignty (Wight, 2022). The narrative of the Tigray war as being a domestic issue persisted. This narrative is reflected in the fact that the African Union (working with the United Nations and the United States) invited only the federal government of Ethiopia and the leadership of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) to the talks that resulted in the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement signed in 2022. There has been little analysis of how Eritrea participated in the Tigray war. Thus, this chapter explores the following question: *What was Eritrea's involvement in the war in Tigray and was it in fact a regional war, or a domestic war?*

Theoretical framework

The drive for communities to come together, revolve around specific thoughts, and identify themselves as unique from others remains subject to scholarly debate. Historically, religion has served as a core value for communities to shape community norms and practices. As religious beliefs were increasingly diversified and citizenry demands for secular systems grew over time, the empires that considered themselves as 'messengers of God' were challenged. This led to the birth of the concept of nationalism – a belonging where people with a similar culture, history, blood, language, and territory come together as citizens of a given nation (Anderson, 2006). A nation has boundaries, although the rationale for these may not always be very clear:

The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation in the way that it was possible, in certain epochs, for, say, Christians to dream of a wholly Christian planet. (Anderson, 2006, p. 7)

Anderson (2006) argued that nations are not ancient communities connected by blood, language, history, culture, and/or territory, as nationalists often claim, but the distinctly modern imagination of a given state's population as constituting a static community produced by nationalism. He added:

It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which the Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. Coming to maturity at a stage of human history when even the most devout adherents of any universal religion were inescapably confronted with the living pluralism of such religions and the allomorphism between each faith's ontological claims and territorial stretch, nations dream of being free, and, if under God, directly so. The gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state. (Anderson, 2006, p. 7)

According to Anderson, the sovereign nation is imagined as a community in which people are equal participants:

It is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. (Anderson, 2006, p. 7)

Anderson discussed that it is only possible for members of a given nation to *imagine* that they have a relationship with all other members across time and space, as it is impossible for all the members to know one another; the nation must be understood as an imagined community in which nationalism is a progressive force (Anderson, 2006). The imagined narrative of the nation binds the citizens together.

Globalisation is challenging the concept of national belonging. Salazar stated:

The relationship between place, collective identity, and socio-cultural processes of identification is a contested aspect of the (dis)connections between (post) nationalism and its underlying concept of belonging. (Salazar, 2021, p. 1)

Tsing scrutinised the action-reaction between the growing forces of globalisation as increasingly colliding with local struggles (Tsing, 2005). She defined globalisation as the introduction of a way of thinking about the history of social projects, including business and local empowerment and, hence, not thinking of everything in the

world at once (Tsing, 2005). This is because, according to Tsing (2005), globalisation grows spatially, while cultural diversity continues to appear as an important factor in these interconnections.

Tsing described this interaction of globalisation as ‘friction’, as a metaphor for the diverse and conflicting social interactions that make up the contemporary world (Tsing, 2005): “this is a particular kind of universality: It can only be charged and enacted in the sticky materiality of practical encounters” (Tsing, 2005, p. 1). Cultures are co-produced in interactions causing friction, which is “the awkward, unequal, unstable and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (Tsing, 2005, p. 1).

Thus, the concept of friction helps to understand that nationalism and national belonging are dynamic and subject to contestation and change over time. This emanates from the perspective that the way people relate to the concept of a state is subject to their interpretation of life, which limits the power of the state as not absolute, but rather a dynamic phenomenon (Tsing, 2005).

Methodology

Using a qualitative research design, this research explored how the involvement of Eritrea in Tigray is explained from the local perspective of the victims and witnesses. A literature review of studies and policy documents was conducted to sketch the background situation. Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs), and observations. The interviews were carried out by Daniel Tesfa (Tesfa), Mirjam Van Reisen (Van Reisen), and Seife Hailu Gebreslassie (Gebreslassie).

The IDIs and KIIs are focused on selected geographic areas where the Eritrean army was alleged to be present: Aksum, Sheraro, Tahtay Adyabo, Egela and Irob woredas¹ as well as Samre town.

¹ An administrative unit in Ethiopia equivalent to a district.

IDs were conducted in Sheraro, Egela, and Samre and with an internally displaced person (IDP) from Guliso.² The KIIs were conducted with victims of atrocities, eyewitnesses as well as members of the interim government administration in Tahtay Adyabo, Egela, and Irob woredas. Observation of the Aksum massacre by one of the members of the research team who kept diary notes of his observation are also used in the research. A minimum of five and a maximum of six IDs were conducted with survivors of atrocities and family members of victims in the selected places. In addition, KIIs were conducted with victims of atrocities, eyewitnesses, and interim local administration members, who provided a general overview of the situations as well as individual stories, which were already addressed by the IDs. The list of respondents was registered in an Excel sheet and codes were assigned for each respondent, as indicated in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1. Coding and dates of data collection

Assigned code	Type of data collection	Date of data collection
GSIDI01-05	IDI	9 July 2023
SHIDI06-10	IDI	4-6 June 2023
SMIDI11-16	IDI	11 June 2023
GUIDI17	IDI	23 July 2023
AXFGD01	FGD	23 March 2023
GSGFD02	FGD	8 July 2023
GSKII01	KII	9 July 2023
TAKII02	KII	7 June 2023
IRKII03	KII	18 July 2023
TDFKII04	KII	12 May 2022

² In Sheraro and Samre minors 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 one or both of their parents.

Assigned code	Type of data collection tool	Date of data collection
CHKII05-07	KII	19 July 2021
MDKII08	KII	16 January 2024
EAKII09-10	KII	5 March 2021
BTKII11	KII	21 April 2021

The interviews looked at perceptions on the relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia with a special focus on Tigray, the perception of the drivers of the Eritrean aggression in the Tigray war, as well as perceptions regarding international actors in the war. They were held in the places visited by the first author of this study over the period 2021–2024. The qualitative data was transcribed, translated, coded according to four themes, and categorised using sub-themes on four frames. A coding-labelling strategy was employed to analyse the data obtained from in-depth interviews (IDI), focus group discussions (FGD), key informant interviews (KII), and observation.

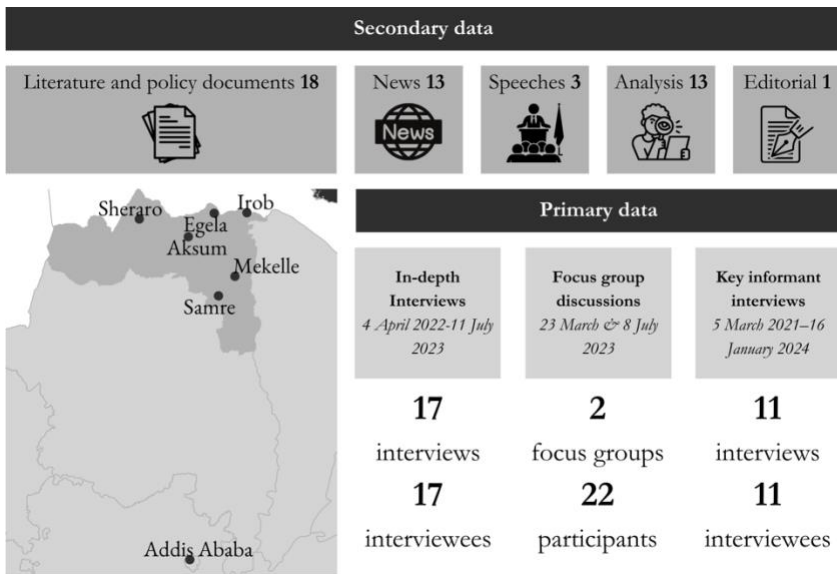


Figure 4.1. Overview of data collected and used in the study

The selection of the themes was reviewed several times after brainstorming on the transcribed data. The drafts of the themes were crosschecked again to capture the essence of the data. Sub-themes that contribute to the bigger themes were then identified. Finally, the data was analysed based on the coded themes and sub-themes, which is explained in the result section.

Background: Historical shifts over sense of belonging

The Eritrean highlanders living north of the Mereb River and Tigrayans living south of Mereb have a common historical and political-economic background that goes back to the establishment of the Aksumite civilisation using the Adulis sea trade route (Alemseged, 1998). Following the decline of the Aksumite civilisation in the 10th century A.D., the empire was fragmented into parts with semi-autonomous governance, where Bahre Negasi (King of the Sea) was among the rulers until the 19th century (Getahun, 1974; Alemseged, 1998). The trans-Mereb Tigray extended from the Red Sea in the northeast to Alewaha in the south, as one of the two major provinces of Abyssinia (Alemseged, 1998).

Following the opening of the Suez Canal, the Egyptian advances were halted by the Tigrayan Emperor of Ethiopia, Yohannes IV (Getahun, 1974), and his renowned lieutenant, Alula, at Gundet in 1875 and Gura in 1876 (Alemseged, 1998). As the Mahdist rebellion prevented Egypt from taking control of the Red Sea coast, in 1885, the colonial master in Sudan-Britain invited Italy to control Massawa against its competitor France (Killion, 1998). Menelik-II signed the Wuchale Treaty in 1889 that handed over Bahre Negash to the Italians, for which they coined a new name: Eritrea (Getahun, 1974). This is the historical turning point when Eritrea appeared as a creation of Italy, an Italian colony for almost 60 years, until Italy's defeat by the Allied Forces in World War II (Tesfagiorgis, 2015). The UN decided to return Eritrea to Ethiopia in 1952, under a federal relationship. Ethiopia, ruled by Haile Selassie, dismantled the federation after 10 years.

The annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia prompted the rebel group, the Eritrea Liberation Front (ELF), to launch an armed struggle against Ethiopian repression in 1961 (Reid, 2007). The Eritrean resistance

movement met with massive Ethiopian military mobilisation (Moonis, 1984). The ELF was criticised over its resistance tactics and military and political mobilisation strategies. This resulted in the establishment of the Eritrea People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which would subsequently dominate among the rebel groups struggling for independence. The Ethiopian imperial regime of Haile Selassie (with US support) and then the Derg regime's (Mengistu Hailemariam's) Marxist rule (with support from Russia), continued large-scale counterinsurgency campaigns, burning villages and massacring civilians in Tigray and Eritrea (Killion, 1998).

Contact between the Tigrayan and Eritrean liberation movements developed before the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) launched its armed struggle in February 1975. Tigrayans living in Eritrea, particularly students at the University of Asmara, endeavoured to obtain promises of assistance from the ELF and especially from the EPLF (Young, 1996). For the relationship to advance to military training, the TPLF recognised the EPLF's right to fight for the independence of Eritrea. The TPLF itself resolved to be in the vanguard of the liberation of the whole of Ethiopia from the authoritarianism of the Derg regime (Reid, 2021). The TPLF benefited from the ELF's cross-border raids on Derg bases in Tigray, which resulted in close military relations between both sides. The EPLF joined this in 1976. This enabled the movements to resist the Derg regime's military offense, called the Raza Project (Young, 1996). The alliance between TPLF and ELF was hampered and led to a strong TPLF-EPLF alliance:

[...] the ELF's wide field of operations in Tigray became a principal cause of the complete break in relations with the TPLF. The ELF's territorial interpretation of Eritrea went beyond the Italian-defined colonial boundaries to include parts of north-western Tigray, a concept that TPLF could not accept. In addition, the ELF's alliances with the nobility-led Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) and the pro-Marxist Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), which the TPLF was challenging for supremacy of the anti-Derg opposition in Tigray, became the source of growing tensions. Moreover, the TPLF found that it was unable to maintain ties with two organizations engaged in an acrimonious struggle for an Eritrea-wide hegemony. Given the language and cultural links that bound the membership of the TPLF and the EPLF and the latter's stronger Marxist credentials than those of

the Islamic-oriented ELF, the TPLF not surprisingly gravitated to the EPLF, and in the late 1970s joined in what proved to be a successful campaign to remove the ELF from the central highlands of Eritrea and Tigray. (Young, 1996, pp. 3–4)

The quest for military domination among the resistance groups in Eritrea also served as an impediment towards organisational unity, which resulted in the defeat of ELF by the EPLF, causing the former to retreat to Sudanese border in 1980–1981 (Moonis, 1984). For both to realise their ambitions as sole Eritrean and Tigrayan movements, the EPLF and TPLF cooperated to oust ELF from its strongholds in Eritrea (Moonis, 1984), while the TPLF defeated the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) and the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) in Tigray in 1978, which allowed it to devote resources to challenge the Derg, notably by attacking Ethiopia’s supply lines to Eritrea (Young, 1996). By 1980 an even more powerful TPLF had forced the Derg to rely increasingly on air and sea transport to supply its troops garrisoned in Eritrea, and, for this, valued assistance was supplied by the EPLF to the TPLF, including technical skills, advanced weaponry, and military training (Young, 1996). However, the EPLF-TPLF alliance soon moved from a strategic to a tactical arrangement:

[...]The course of alliance in the 1970s was mainly dominated by EPLF which in many ways had common cause with the TPLF in their respective struggles against the Derg, but which had important differences in ideology, military tactics, and the very definition of nationality; the two movements severed all contact in the mid-1980s. ...the movements renewed a tactical alliance in the late 1980s, and together overthrew the Derg, with Eritrea becoming independent. (Reid 2021, p. 2)

Human Rights Watch (1991) estimates that 1.4 million people were killed during the Ethiopian civil war between the Derg regime and the rebel groups. At the hour of victory, relations between the two movements appeared genuinely warm and friendly (Plaut & Gilkes, 1999). Although reluctantly accepting that both the EPLF and TPLF had come to power through Marxist credentials, Western countries forecast that the administration of both would bring peace to the Horn of Africa (Henze, 1991). This marked the underestimation of the difficult relationship between EPLF and TPLF:

[...] profound tensions remained beneath the civility of post-liberation diplomacy where the TPLF perceived in their Eritrean counterparts a dangerous hubris bordering on contempt for all others, while the EPLF saw in the TPLF a movement they had helped create – the former had initially helped to train TPLF fighters – and one which therefore should allow them some political and military influence in a much weakened Ethiopia. (Reid, 2021, p. 2)

Short of the anticipated new peaceful chapter for the Horn of Africa, as heralded by the mainstream media (Tekle, 1994), with President Clinton anointing the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea as princes of an African Renaissance (Perlez, 2000), Ethiopia and Eritrea, under TPLF and EPLF leadership, went to war in 1998. This war lasted until 2000 and claimed the lives of between 50,000 and 100,000 people (Congressional Research Service, 2000).

Although many researchers said that the drives of the Ethio-Eritrea war were beyond borders (Young, 1996; Hamilton, 2000; Reid 2003), the Organization of African Unity (OAU), UN and the United States of America proposed a border-based mediation, called a Framework Agreement, which coined the term the return of “Badme and its environs” (Congressional Research Service, 2000). Accordingly, the decision made by the commission assigned by OAU explained the subject of dispute as the geographical description of the boundary, which ended up the delimiting western, central, and eastern borders (Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission, 2002). After the border demarcation, Eritrea and Ethiopia stayed in a ‘no war no peace’ stalemate for almost two decades.

Table 4.2. Shifts in Ethiopia-Eritrea relations

Shift in relations	International actors’ contribution or response to the shift	Consequences of the shift
From early Aksumite civilisation until 1889	Adulis was the sea trade route of the Aksum civilisation.	Culturally and socio-economically intertwined people
Eritrea under Italian colonial rule (1889-1952)	Wuchale Agreement	The people divided into two: south and north of the Mereb River

Shift in relations	International actors' contribution or response to the shift	Consequences of the shift
Eritrea federated with Ethiopia, but Emperor Hailelassie violated the right of Eritrea to autonomy	This was ruled by the United Nations in 1952.	Pervasive grievances among the public in Eritrea against Ethiopia created an opportunity for the Eritrean elites, who opposed the United Nations decision to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia, to translate their intentions into armed struggle.
ELF and, then EPLF, resistance movement for Eritrean independence started an armed struggle	Rebel groups in Eritrea started the independence movement in the early 1960s. They were supported by Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, North Yemen, Iraq, and Syria as well as China.	The Eritrean and Tigray populace became victims of the war; their farmlands serving as war fronts. Regardless of their allegiance, they were forced to provide basic services to the soldiers on both sides.
Overthrow of the imperial regime in Ethiopia by the military Derg regime in 1974	Soviet Russia, Cuba, and other Socialist-Marxist Eastern European states	Shift from imperial rule by a 'god' to socialist a dictatorship
TPLF established in 1975	TPLF received training and military support from EPLF, conditional upon the TPLF accepting the right of Eritrean independence.	The Derg regime targeted Tigrayan and Eritrean populations as a means of draining insurgencies.

Shift in relations	International actors' contribution or response to the shift	Consequences of the shift
Both supported each other to oust their opponent in their respective territory of influence.	TPLF defeated EDU and EPRP, while EPLF defeated ELF becoming the sole representatives of their respective resistance movements.	The population in Tigray and Eritrea suffered from the war among the rebel fighters.
The strategic rifts among the leadership of EPLF and TPLF, which have existed underneath for years, started to come to the surface in the 1980s.	The Western policy actors overlooked the effect of these strategic rifts on the Horn of Africa.	While the Tigrayan population was in staggering famine, EPLF cut the route to Sudan where aid agencies prepared rations in June 1985. The famine claimed the lives of 1 million people.
The downfall of the Derg regime in 1991	UN organised a referendum after which Eritrea became an independent country.	An estimate of 1.4 million people were killed by the civil war.
Ethiopia under TPLF/EPRDF and Eritrea under EPLF signed the Asmara Pact in September 1993. This is also known as the honeymoon period.	US President Clinton described Meles Zenawi and Isayas Afwerki as “princes of an African Renaissance” in 1998.	Common market as well as people-to-people relations facilitated in 1993–1998.
Ethiopia-Eritrea war (1998–2000)	OAU, UN, and US defined the war as a border confrontation, which resulted in the establishment of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Border Commission .	Loss of lives 50,000–100,000

Shift in relations	International actors' contribution or response to the shift	Consequences of the shift
Stalemate (2000–2018)	Neither was the arbitration of border delimitation implemented nor normalisations achieved.	The close socio-cultural, people-to-people relationships and economic exchange were cut as a result of the policy.
UN-sanctioned Eritrea over its destabilisation role in the Horn of Africa in 2009.	UN imposed an arms embargo as well as travel restrictions and a freeze of the assets of the political and military leaders in Eritrea.	Eritrea used forced conscription of the youth into indefinite military training as a policy. This and other violations of human rights resulted in the illegal migration of the Eritrean youth.
A Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship was signed between Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isayas Afwerki on 9 July 2018.	UN lifted the sanction on Eritrea on 14 November 2018.	People-to-people relations and economic exchange were among the top global headlines of September 2018.
Eritrea participated in the Tigray war (2020–2022)	The AU, UN, US, and EU supported the Pretoria Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities, which defined the Tigray war as an internal conflict. Only the Ethiopian government and TPLF signed the agreement	Eritrea was implicated in massacres, sexual violence, extrajudicial killing, and bombardments (including chemical gas), which the UN Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia allege are crimes of aggression, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The continuous illegal presence of the Eritrean army in Tigray hampered the

Shift in relations	International actors' contribution or response to the shift	Consequences of the shift
		implementation of the agreement.

In 2018 unexpectedly a Peace Agreement was signed by Eritrea and Ethiopia with the involvement of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. In November 2020, war broke out after Ethiopia declared a law enforcement operation in Tigray on 4 November.³ Eritrea invaded Tigray at the same time, even though this was denied for five months and only admitted by PM Abiy on 23 March 2021 in the Ethiopian Parliament. On 2 November 2022, the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was signed between the federal Government of Ethiopia and the regional government of Tigray, the TPLF.

Results

This study investigates the period after the signing of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Peace Agreement in 2018, seen from the perspective of people interviewed in Tigray. The interviews and focus group discussions aimed to understand the Tigray war in view of Eritrea-Ethiopia relations. In particular, it attempts to establish if the war was in fact a regional war (the involvement of Eritrea, including in the planning) or a domestic conflict (as claimed by the federal government of Ethiopia). From the analysis of the interviews, the following themes were identified:

- Cause of the war
- Scope of participation of Eritrea
- Ethnic hostility from Eritrea towards Tigray
- Magnanimity towards the adversary

³ Although it is argued that it actually started on 3 November, when it is alleged that Ethiopian federal special forces were sent to Mekelle (UN International Commission of Human rights Experts on Ethiopia, 2022).

- Scope of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement

Cause of the war

It was the surprise attack by the regional Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) on the Northern Command of the ENDF that was echoed by Ethiopia and Eritrea as the cause of the declaration of the Tigray war. However, this was not the perspective of people interviewed in Tigray. The participants in the research explained that the cause of the Tigray war should be examined from the perspective of the underlying factors, beyond explaining the trigger (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023; GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023; SMIDI13, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). According to the focus group discussants, the dynamics in the relationships between Tigray and Amhara, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, long before 4 November 2020, should be examined to understand the causes of the war.

According to participants, there was a strategy of besieging Tigray from the inside, which was manifested by cutting off Tigray from Ethiopia. Amhara Regional State cut off the transportation lines connecting Gondar-Humera, Debark-Shire and Kobo-Alamata, and targeted Tigrayans living in Amhara at-least two years before the war was declared (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). The federal government of Ethiopia contributed to the sense of isolation by framing ethnic Tigrayans as a threat to the national interest, employing generalised ethnic slurs in official media campaigns and blaming Tigrayans for all the perceived and actual wrongdoings of the previous EPRDF rule (SMIDI12, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023).

The discussants explained that the ethnic slurs were complemented by political tit-for-tat between the Prosperity Party (PP) and the TPLF, including TPLF's rejection of join the PP labelling it an illegal merger, and the legitimacy crisis following the postponing of elections in Ethiopia, while Tigray went ahead with elections at regional level (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). According to the interviewees, the tactics used by the federal government of Ethiopia's tactics to oust regional governments in Somalia and Afar regions were not effective in Tigray

(SMIDI13, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023; SMIDI16, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). Then the federal government aimed to remove the military armaments (armoured vehicles etc) from Tigray, as most of the military resources were under the Northern Command of the ENDF, as Eritrea was the threat to the country (SMIDI16, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023; TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022). But the people of Tigray resisted this plan, which prevented the relocation of the military resources (SHIDI08, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 4 June 2023; TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022).

At ground level, in Mahy 2020, the ENDF and EDF, which had been enemies and watchful of each other's moves for the past 20 years, started visiting each other's military camps and sharing food rations and mattresses (GSIDI01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023). In a televised address PM Abiy Ahmed stated that the federal government was going to take measures against the election in Tigray (SHIDI07, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 4 June 2023). This threat was advanced in the first week of September 2020 by the EDF's move to construct a new road across the border at Belesa, between Tserona in Eritrea and Egela in Ethiopia (GSIDI02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023). Accordingly, relations between the ENDF and EDF improved and they shared artillery; discussions were also held between military leadership level in Belesa (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023).

A key informant who had been a member of the military leadership in one of the divisions of the Northern Command of the ENDF stated that the mobilisation towards military convergence in the units of EDF and ENDF in border areas was questioned by many soldiers as being a threat to national security (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022). Similarly, focus group discussants who had been displaced from border areas of Egela to Gerhu Sirnay stated that some ENDF soldiers were doubtful of the collaboration with the EDF. They expressed their concern that the ENDF's move to show its forts/bastions, military positions, and artilleries to the EDF in the last week of July 2020 violated

sovereignty and territorial integrity (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023).

In the second week of August 2020, the ENDF responded to the criticism that both Ethiopia and Eritrea, through Abiy Ahmed and Isayas Afwerki, agreed to share their military capacities so that they could defend themselves from enemies within their territories and within the Horn of Africa in general (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023; TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022). According to a former military leader of one of the ENDF's divisions in Northern Command:

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed once invited the military leadership of all ENDF divisions who were in a meeting in Addis Ababa for lunch in his palace. Then he said "Our soldier is there to guard the border not the constitution" disclaiming the concerns about constitutional sovereignty raised by some of the military leadership related to the developments in military relations with EDF. (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022)

The participants in the focus group discussion in Gerhu Sirnay also stated that mechanised brigades of the EDF⁴ were seen in long queues

⁴ A mechanized brigade is a type of military formation that consists of several battalions equipped with armoured vehicles, such as infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), armoured personnel carriers (APCs), and often includes tanks. The primary characteristic of a mechanized brigade is its ability to rapidly move and fight alongside armoured vehicles, providing both mobility and protection for infantry forces. Key Components of a Mechanized Brigade:

- Infantry Battalions: These are the main fighting force within the brigade, typically transported and supported by armoured vehicles.
- Armoured Vehicles: The brigade is equipped with IFVs and APCs, which allow infantry to move quickly across the battlefield while being protected from small arms fire and shrapnel.
- Tanks: Many mechanized brigades also include a tank battalion, providing heavy firepower and the ability to engage enemy armoured forces.
- Artillery: The brigade often has its own artillery units, which can include self-propelled howitzers, providing indirect fire support.
- Reconnaissance Units: These units conduct scouting missions to gather intelligence and provide early warning of enemy movements.
- Engineers: Engineering units within the brigade can construct fortifications, clear obstacles, and conduct demolition work.

on the newly constructed road at the Ethiopia-Eritrea border at Belesa a month before the declared war (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023).

An interviewee who was displaced in the first week of November 2020 following the Guliso massacre in Oromia stated:

The units of the 24th Division of ENDF were in-charge in securing peace and security in Guliso following the frequent conflict in the locality. But they were ordered to leave the area immediately in the third week of October 2020 which resulted in the regeneration of attacks on civilians in the last week of October and 1 November 2020. [...] Let's leave the attribution of responsibility to an independent investigation. But the question here is why at this time the massacre that I escaped was perpetrated in Guliso. It was because the military was moved out of the area. This violence forced me and my family to be displaced to Addis Ababa leaving all the means of our livelihoods behind. (GUIDI17, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 July 2023)

The military leadership of the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) stated that the armies outside Tigray were mobilised at least a week before the war was declared, indicating that the breakout of war was not a surprise, but rather the result of the prior preparations and military mobilisation (TDFKII04, interview with SHG, face-to-face, 12 May 2022). A former member of ENDF military leadership who later joined the TDF stated:

The 24th Division of ENDF was called to position itself in the corridor from Gonder to Debarik along with one Agazi Commando Brigade, 12th Division from Jimma and the Renaissance Dam, 22nd from Gambela, 33rd from around Gonder with Fano and Amhara Special Forces while the 25th Division from Somalia and Harar, 2nd Mechanized Division from Ogaden, 21st from Negele Borona, 32nd from Adama, 13th from Dire Dawa and 6th Mechanized Division from Semera lined

A mechanized brigade is designed for fast-paced, mobile warfare, capable of advancing quickly across varied terrain while maintaining a high level of firepower and protection. This makes it suitable for offensive operations, as well as defensive roles where mobility and the ability to counterattack are important. The brigade's mechanization enables it to operate effectively in environments where traditional foot infantry would be at a disadvantage due to the need for speed and protection against enemy fire.

from Woldia to Kobo. (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022)

The key informant stated that significant armies were also positioned in the corridor from Shambuko of Eritrea to the border of Badme, as well as Senafe (Eritrea) to the border of Zalambessa (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022).

From within Eritrea, 8 divisions, 2 mechanised and 1 motorised, of the Western Command of the ENDF, along with the 46th and 48th ENDF mechanised divisions, and 12 divisions of Eritrean army were positioned from Shambuko to Badme. In addition, 2 mechanised divisions and 14 divisions were also prepared to attack from Senafe to Zalambesa (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022).

In addition, Ethiopian Airlines conducted successive flights from Addis Ababa to Asmara; the research team confirmed the flights of 25 September and 20 October 2020, which had the same flight number (ETH8312), which were also reported on social media. These flights were departing from Addis Ababa carrying soldiers and military logistics to Asmara and Massawa at the same time (BTKII11, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 21 April 2021).⁵

The flight on 25 September 2020 was an irregular chartered flight with flight number ETH8312, which departed from Addis Ababa and arrived in Asmara at 12:29 hours and departed back to Addis Ababa at 13:23 hours local time. On 20 October 2023, the same irregular chartered flight number (ETH8312) departed from Addis Ababa and arrived in Asmara at 02:17 local time, and departed back to Addis Ababa at 13:53 local time (EAKII09, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 5 March 2021).⁶ Hence, it appears that the ENDF, Amhara Special Force, and EDF had mobilised military from within Eritrea to Tigray long before the declared war.

⁵ Flight numbers obtained from the key informant were checked by a specialised organisation which confirmed the flights took place and was able to show the routes of the identified planes. The authors obtained a report of the flight schedules and routes, and details about the specific flights.

⁶ Same verification as under previous footnote.

A key informant said that the Northern Command of the ENDF was on a mission to dismantle the political leadership of Tigray using a commando military group that landed in Alula Aba Nega Airport in Mekelle late on the evening of 3 November 2020, under the pretext of delivering new currency notes (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022). The research team confirmed the numbers of two flights on 3 November 2020: ET3102, which departed from Addis Ababa Airport at 17:31 local time, arrived in Alula Aba Nega Airport in Mekelle at 18:34 local time and departed back to Addis Ababa at 04:21 local time (EAKII10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 5 March 2021). The second flight was ET3100, which departed from Addis Ababa Bole Airport at 21:05 local time, arrived in Alula Aba Nega Airport in Mekelle at 22:25 local time and departed back to Addis Ababa at 04:07 local time (EAKII10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 5 March 2021). Social media reported that the commandos were sent to arrest and kill the Tigray government leadership, in coordination with the Northern Command of the ENDF. A second key informant also indicated that the clash was triggered by the commandos in the airport (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022).

Eritrea: Part of the war design

The respondents explained that Eritrea's push to interfere in the internal affairs of Ethiopia was not a new phenomenon, but rather informed by historical aspirations. The interviewees stated they were aware that Eritrea used to arm rebels, aiming at regime change in Ethiopia, including the opposition group Arbegnoch Ginbot 7, of which (Prof.) Birhanu Nega and Andargachew Tsige were among the leadership (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).⁷

⁷ Birhanu Nega and Andargachew Tsige were among the founders and board members of Ethiopia Satellite Television (ESAT), which is known for the dissemination of a rebel call against ethnic Tigrayans (SMIDI11, focus group interview with DT, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). Eritrea also sponsored and hosted Ginbot 7 Radio Broadcasting, disseminating its programmes through the only media in Eritrea, the state-owned Eritrea Television and its radio counterpart Dmtsi Hafash (Eri-TV, 2017).

After PM Abiy Ahmed came to power, the leadership of Ginbot 7 were brought home to Ethiopia and Birhanu Nega was (and still is) among the government appointees, while Andargachew Tsige served as advisor to the Prime Minister (GSFGD02, a focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023; AXFGD01, a focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). The discussants explained that Eritrea had sent its agents to the Ethiopian incumbent (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). This was followed by what participants called a ‘surprise’ declaration of peace in 2018, a few months after PM Abiy assumed power, which was reaffirmed by the signing of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship, although the terms of the agreement remained secret (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023).

The participants stated that the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) (the new name for the EPLF after Eritrean independence and the only party in Eritrea) had disclosed that the policy of the peace process was a strategy to start war with Tigray (SMIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023; GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023). Simultaneously, with the peace process between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the only state-owned media, Eritrea Television (Eri TV), broadcast President Isayas Afwerki saying “Woyane⁸... game over”, as a threat to the people of Tigray. The participants opined that, Tigray was targeted for war to protect the peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea (see also ERI-TV, Eritrea [Official], 2018a; ERI-TV, Eritrea [Official], 2018b). This was followed by official visits to each other’s military positions, which had been built and used for decades to defend themselves from each other. The respondents stated that the speeches by President Isayas could not be considered utterances of an individual, but were the officially declared state policy of Eritrea against Tigray (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). The speeches were perceived as a threat.

⁸ A derogatory term used in Eritrea to refer to the people of Tigray.

The secret nature of the peace deal also caused mistrust. One of the interviewees stated:

The people of Tigray repeatedly called on both sides to make the reconciliation terms official rather than personalized to the leaders of both sides. This is because it is the Tigray people that will be affected by the terms the most, positively or negatively, which shares more than a thousand kilometres border with Eritrea. But this request for the right to be informed was framed as negation from the wave of the so-called peace and friendship. (GSIDI01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023)

According to one of the key informants, Eritrea had been hosting the Western Command of ENDF, which was positioned to attack Tigray from Shambuko (village in Eritrea bordering Badme of Tigray) to Badme, as well as from Serha (village in Eritrea bordering Zalambessa) to Zalambess. The soldiers and artilleries were being transported on Ethiopia Airlines to Asmara and Massawa (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022). The informant added:

Eritrea also positioned most of its armies along the ENDF to attack Tigray from the Eritrean side. Both countries had made coordinated military preparations and mobilised and positioned vast armies aimed at attacking Tigray from all sides at least weeks before the declared war. The war, from its first date, was begun between the allies of Ethiopia and Eritrea against Tigray. Therefore, Eritrea is part of the war design – if not the pioneer. (TDFKII04, interview with Gebreslassie, face-to-face, 12 May 2022)

The research team learnt from a verified video that showed ENDF and EDF conducting a large-scale artillery handover, which was geo-located to be in Mukuti village inside Eritrea on 5 November 2020. The military handover by ENDF further indicates a pre-war arrangement, agreement, and a division of labour between the commands of the Ethiopian and Eritrean armies (original video in possession of the authors⁹).

⁹ The video was checked by Bellingcat for the purpose of geolocation and confirmation of veracity. The authors also obtained background information disclosing the way in which the video was obtained.

The research team found that Ethiopian Airlines continued its irregular chartered and cargo flights to Asmara and Massawa during the first and second weeks of the war. On 6 November 2020, ET8312 departed from Addis Ababa and arrived in Asmara at 13:13 hours. It then departed from Asmara to Addis Ababa on the same day at 14:29 hours. From 7 to 9 November 2020, flight number ET8124 was recorded from Addis Ababa to Gondar then to Asmara, and then back to Gondar, arriving in Addis Ababa on 9 November 2020. Between 8 and 9 November 2020, Ethiopian Airlines flight number ET3312 departed from Addis Ababa to Massawa-Eritrea then back to Bahir Dar and to Gondar, finally arriving in Addis Ababa on 9 November (EAKII10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 5 March 2021).

That same day, the Eritrean army shelled Humera town in the Western Tigray from the Eritrean bordering town of Omohajar (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Ethiopia Airlines flight number ET3312 departed from Addis Ababa on 12 November 2020, arrived at 15:01 and departed back to Addis Ababa at 19:18 local time (EAKII09, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 5 March 2021).

The next day Ethiopian Airlines conducted three flights: ET2206 from Addis Ababa to Dire Dawa to Asmara then back to Addis Ababa; ET2142 from Addis Ababa to Bahir Dar to Asmara then back to Addis Ababa; and ET3314 from Addis Ababa to Asmara then to Addis Ababa (EAKII10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 5 March 2021). As the flights between Ethiopian and Eritrean airports continued extensively, social media users shared photos of soldiers in the planes. The pictures indicated that the flights were transporting Ethiopian soldiers and artilleries that were used in the invasion of Tigray from within Eritrea (BTKII09, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 21 April 2021).

Two of the focus group participants in Gerhu Sirnay stated that they were displaced from their locality in Hoya Medeb Vicinity (bordering with Tserona of Eritrea) of Egela Woreda in the early morning of 3 November 2020, a day before the declaration of the law enforcement

operation (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023). An interviewee said:

I had been collecting harvest in my farmland around the ENDF Ford in Belesa in the early morning of 3 November 2020. I witnessed the unpleasant behaviour of soldiers repeatedly firing bullets toward the houses in Belesa. The soldiers, wearing Eritrean and Ethiopia armies' uniforms, were lined in buses directed toward Gerhu Sirnay. I counted 6 pickups and 14 buses lined. I sneaked from the harvest to my house as I saw one passer-by man being killed by the bullet shot from those who were in the double pickup cars lined up first. Then I decided to escape before they reached out to us in their house-to-house search. Together with my children, those of whom were at home, we waited to hide in the hills, and travelled to Gerhu Sirnay. One of my children was not at home at the moment; I couldn't get his whereabouts yet. (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023)

An elder man also stated:

I witnessed people being killed by the soldiers wearing Ethiopian and Eritrean armies' uniforms in Belesa; then the dwellers of the bordering areas who escaped the indiscriminate killing were displaced to Gerhu Sirnay. I have been living begging for food from the Gerhu Sirnay community ever since as our village is still under the occupation of Eritrea. (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023)

Participants emphasised that Eritrea was part of the invasion of Tigray, prior to the official declaration of the law enforcement operation by the Ethiopian government. According to participants, Eritrea facilitated the invasion, but also acted independently. The Eritrean involvement expanded after the official declaration of the invasion on 4 November.

The discussants in Aksum and Gerhu Sirnay stated that the EDF was engaged in shelling, bombarding, mass killing of civilians and sexual violence (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023; GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023). An interviewee from Sheraro stated that Eritrean soldiers were transporting the resources they looted from the areas they captured on 18 November through Sheraro (SHIDI06, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 4 June 2023). One of the members of the research team was in Aksum and personally witnessed when EDF

together with ENDF was shelling and bombarding Aksum on 18 November 2020.

A sister of several victims who died as a result of the shelling by the EDF in Adi Yieqoro explained what happened on 20 April 2021 (CHKII05, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 19 July 2021). A resident of Daero locality in Adi Yieqoro village of Ahiferom woreda in the Central Zone of Tigray said, she:

Two of the girls burned and hit by the weapon are my sisters [name deleted for safety] and [name deleted for safety]. One of them was hit by fire and burned immediately while my other sister was hit by remnants of the heavy weapon. (CHKII05, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 19 July 2021)

She stated that the weapon hit a civilian house:

The owner of the house [name deleted for safety] was burned by the fire and also hit by the remnants of the weapon. All of them were heavily affected by the April 20 attack. (CHKII05, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 19 July 2021)

She added:

The heavy weapon was fired from the direction of the village of Adi-Mokuri by the Eritrean soldiers. After it was fired, the girls were hit and a cow has also died. Then the roof of the house was burned, and everything inside the house was completely burned including grains, flour, and all house materials. (CHKII05, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 19 July 2021)

The authors received and studied first-hand interviews, videos, and photographs of the incident, and the location was visited by collaborators of the research team to verify the incident, the location, and the basis for alleging that a phosphorous attack was launched by Eritrean forces (CHKII05-07, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 19 July 2021). Several members of the team who took the videos and interviewed the civilians were interviewed by the research team.¹⁰

¹⁰ The incident was published in a Telegraph exclusive report of the attack, which said “Ethiopian and Eritrean armies may have used powerful incendiary weapons in civilian areas” (Brown & Kassa, 2021). The report furthered “leading chemical weapons experts said the footage is consistent with white phosphorus, which is not considered a chemical weapon but is banned from use against human targets under international law” (Brown & Kassa, 2021).

The participants in the study also explained that Eritrea was and still is among the main actors in the Tigray war. They question why Western policy actors didn't want to frame Eritrea as a foreign aggressor in the context of Tigray, while at the same time they frame Russia's aggression on Ukraine as foreign as far as sovereignty is concerned (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023; AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023; SHIDI07, 4 June 2023; SMIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). Such incorrect problem definition has created an incorrect sense of responsibility for the atrocities and provided the EDF with impunity. This has negatively impacted on regional peace and stability (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).

Interviewees were upset that about a month after Eritrea massacred civilians in Aksum, the African Union and international actors continued to state that the war was an internal conflict (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). To the interviewees this indicated that the regional and international actors were reluctant to accept the reality that the war was regional in nature and not an internal conflict (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023). The participants emphasised that the war was not a domestic one Eritrean and Somalian soldiers physically participated and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China provided military technology support, including unmanned drones, to the ENDF (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023; SMIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023).

Attribution-'Agame': Ethnic slurs and moral disengagement

The interviewees and focus group discussants described indiscriminate killing, massacres, kidnapping, looting and sexual violence as perpetrated by soldiers in the Eritrean army. While committing atrocities, the EDF expressed hate, with expressions such as: "Agame you locked us behind for 30 years, now it's our turn to drag you back 100 years, if we can't deracinate you all" (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). Another respondent heard Eritrean soldiers saying that they would

move Tigray “50 years back in time” (MDKII08, Correspondence with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, Audio recording, 16 January 2024).

Eritrean soldiers captured one of the research interviewees in Samre town, when they were just back from the war in Adi-Awso (which is 15-kilometers from Samre town on the road to Mekelle) on 22 March 2021 (SMIDI16, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). He said:

Eritrean soldiers captured me on the edge of my house. They laid me down and hit me by the muzzle of the gun and three times by the oyster. I begged them to kill me firing a gun not beating by the muzzle but one of them responded ‘We want to see Tigrayans suffer’. I vomited blood following their repeated hits by the muzzle and oyster. (SMIDI16, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

He added that he would have died if his friend hadn’t been able to provide him with medicine from a non-governmental organisation that came to Samre town for the first time (SMIDI16, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). But the soldiers went back to his house after 10 days. He remembered:

The Eritrean soldiers some of who muzzled me while others were watching me suffering came again home. They found me in bed without proper medical treatment. The soldiers then ordered the people around to carry me to Meda Samre. It was not a hospital; it rather was a place where they searched house to house and captured all the men they got in Samre on 2 April 2021. Together with the more than a thousand people in the field, I was ordered to take off my clothes with the help of three people for I was unable to stand. (SMIDI16, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

Another interviewee who was part of the scene in Meda Samre stated that:

Five Eritrean soldiers came to my house. And they immediately tied my hands together handing me over to their comrades while they began looting my house in my presence. They took my clothes, mobile and 3,000 ETB. I was made to be seen naked in Samre Town for hours by the EDF on 2 April 2021. I witnessed atrocities by Eritrean soldiers including beating, ethnic slurs, slur on reproductive bodies, and incarceration. (SMIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

A religious leader who was serving in St. Mary Church in Samre town was similarly captured by the soldiers and taken to the scene (SMIDI15, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). The 78 years old priest remembered:

The Eritrean soldiers ordered me to take them to my house for a search because they said ‘Tigrayan priests are armed’. I responded them it is forbidden for priests to carry guns. They sent me to the mass in Meda Samre while they not only continued their search, but also looted my house properties and building instruments including hammers and jerrycans. I was then ordered to take off my clothes and slurred by the female soldiers who were gathered to mock in-front in front of me. (SMIDI15, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

A 16-year-old child who was sent by his parents with a donkey to fetch water from Bakbako River was also captured by the soldiers early in the morning on 2 April 2021 (SMIDI14, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). He was then taken to Enda Gabir Church (an Orthodox church in Samre town) where he estimated more than 400 men were being held by Eritrea Defence Force (SMIDI14, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). He stated:

I found from 12-year-old children to elders in the 80s – all of them men. The soldiers then prevented priests from entering the church to provide religious services. All of us were calm, waiting for what they would do next. One elder requested the soldier in front of him to allow him to go out to urinate. The soldier responded ‘you Agame consider yourself as human, no you are not; you can urinate on your trousers’. It was a rough time for us not only because of the atrocities, but also their mistreatment of us as animals. They ordered us to go out to the field after the midday. We were ordered to take off our clothes and stay all naked. The female soldiers then were joking comparing the size of the reproductive organs one from another. (SMIDI14, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

A brother of one of the captured men in Samre town who lived in Mekelle, being informed by his sister, complained to the interim government of South-Eastern Zone, which connected him with the military leadership in the Northern Command (SMIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). He testified:

The military leadership detained my brother saying “If the people whom you said captured by Eritrean soldiers are below one hundred we will kill you”. But the Eritrean soldiers refused to provide information to the military leadership based in

the Northern Command of ENDF responding: “We are working based on the directives from our line of command, not yours”. The leadership then called to their command and they informed them a large number of men were captured, which enabled my brother to be released after detention for hours. Then the Eritrean soldiers lined the people up and ordered us all to take off our clothes after the midday of April 2021. (SMIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

Around 1:30–2:00 pm local time, more than a thousand men, under arrest and naked, were released. One of those who had been captured said:

When they let us go, they didn’t even allow us to wear our clothes properly. I was trying to wear my trousers, but one of the soldiers stopped me saying ‘You are not allowed to wear them here; we want you to be seen naked in the street’. Then he ordered me to collect my clothes and go in nudity. (SMIDI13, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

After the dehumanising scene was over in Meda Samre around 2:30 pm local time, one of the captured men approached the military leadership of EDF requesting access to water, electricity, and banking services (SMIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). He said:

He responded to my request ‘We were ordered to kill all men in Tigray let alone provide you services. Our leaders believe that leaving men in Tigray will enable the regeneration of the TPLF junta. They always dictate to us that we don’t need to have mercy for Agame because all of them are traitors. (SMIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

Parents of the victims of the Aksum Massacre also indicated that most of the soldiers did not consider that they were killing human beings (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). A mother whose son was massacred said:

I begged the soldier, who killed my 14-year-old son, to let me take the body so that I could bury him before the hyenas got it. The soldier responded ‘Don’t worry you all Agame are hyenas so the hyenas don’t eat their ancestors’. (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)

The participants in the research explained that most of the Eritrean soldiers they encountered committing atrocities did not show feelings of guilt or remorse (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa,

face-to-face, 8 July 2023; AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). The men who were captured and made to be seen naked in Meda Samre also stated that the soldiers were quick to carry out cruel acts that are considered inappropriate in Tigrayan tradition (SMIDI12, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023; SMIDI15, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). The respondents explained these acts as moral disengagement or dissociation, developed as a result of the indoctrination that the soldiers had been through, framing Tigrayans as enemies and traitors, which enabled the soldiers to perceive Tigrayans as animals and not humans (SMIDI16, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023; AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).

The intention of the war by Eritrean forces can be deduced from the signs by which they communicated. The first author photographed graffiti on a wall of Gerhu Sirnay Hospital, in the Central Zone of Tigray, Egela Woreda (district) on 9 July 2023. This district shares a border with the rural villages and the town of Tserona Eritrea.



Figure 4.2. Slogan written on wall of Gerhu Sirnay Hospital, which was destroyed by the Eritrean Defence Forces

(Photograph by DT captured on 9 July 2023)

The Tigrinya words that the first author captured on 9 July 2023 in Gerhu Sirnay Hospital say “ኤርትራ ትሰዕር” and “ኣዩ ወይን”. The first can be translated as “Eritrea is winning” and as “Poor Woyane” or “Hopeless Woyane”. In this context, ‘Woyane’ is a derogatory term for the people of Tigray people.¹¹

Magnanimity by Eritrean soldiers towards the adversary

A survivor of the Aksum massacre who was shot in his leg stated that it was an Eritrean soldier who enabled him to survive (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). He explained the circumstance as follows:

The oldest soldier of the three ordered the youngest soldier to shoot us all. I was shot in my leg, while the other survivor on his hand; but the three others died immediately as they were shot repeatedly. (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)

The survivor said that he always remembered the confrontation between the soldiers which determined the fate of two who survived, one of them shot once in leg while the other in the hand (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). He continued:

The oldest soldier said: ‘Check them all or shoot them again’. The one who shot us responded ‘All of them are dead’. But he ordered him again ‘I told you to check them all or shoot them again’. He responded: ‘It’s my responsibility to check; all are dead’. The one who was shot in his hand had shown some movement, but the soldier went as if he didn’t notice it. That movement was the point of departure for me and the one who was shot in his hand kind of life after death. Then we kept silent as if we all died until the soldiers left the compound. (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)

He stated that there were a few people who tried their best to show humanity when the context allowed them (AXFGD01, focus group

¹¹ In the philosophy of gene there are two kinds of meaning, the most visible and direct meaning, and the underlying deeper meaning contained in it. This is also referred as wax (the varnish, what you see) and gold (what lies underneath). ‘Woyane’ is both a term of pride, if used by Tigrayan people themselves, and a slur, used in hate-speech by adversaries. The meaning depends heavily on the context.

interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). He remembered a particularly sadistic event:

Immediately after the soldiers left the compound I preferred to stay there while the one who was shot in his hand ran through the backyard of the house to another compound. He again faced another challenge. As blood was flowing from his arm covering his clothes, the kennel of dogs in the village which were gathered in the compound was brought on him. He had to fight them with his one-hand holding stick that he kicked around for 15 minutes. Then people in the compound saw him fighting with the kennel and took him to their home. (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)

He stated that he wanted to get time where he and the soldier who intentionally left them alive could meet and discuss the context in a peaceful situation; but it was nearly impossible to find him, as he had no name nor address for the soldier (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).

A religious leader in Samre town met one of the soldiers who were from Senafe after the scene of nudity on 2 April 2021 (SMIDI15, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). He said:

There was one Eritrean soldier who used to walk around our house. I wanted to discuss with him what was going on. As I told him I wanted to meet him, he asked me 'How can I trust you' then I responded I don't lie for myself. Then we went to my house. My first question for him was, why this was all on Tigray. He responded 'While the Eritrean dictator was planting hate against Tigrayans in Sawa, you were focusing on building Bolaso, which you couldn't be able to protect it now'. (SMIDI15, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

The soldier discussed that he understood the war was targeting the Tigrayan community in both countries (SMIDI15, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). Their discussion continued:

I wondered how he managed to hide his true feelings and pretend as if he is a supporter of the PFDJ for three years. He told me 'Until I get a chance to escape with less risk, I had to act silly as they do'. I asked why Eritrea was part of this war. His response was straightforward 'because the PFDJ perceives that it couldn't realise its dominance in the region while Tigrayans and their history are there to interrupt the creation of Eritrean nationalism'. (SMIDI15, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

He explained that the Tigrayan population on both sides of the Mereb River suffered for decades, for their leadership could not coexist (SMIDI15, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). As indicated by one of the interviewees, the people on both sides of the river were (and still are) targeted for hate speech and contrasting narratives by the political leadership aimed at mobilising support against each other (GSIDI01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023). According to the informants, the local voices of the grassroots communities, religious leaders, elders, and youth-led bottom-up peace-building initiatives needed to be promoted to bring about sustainable resolution of the cycles of war in the region.

Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement: More questions than answers

According to the key informant interviewees, more than seven months into the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, Eritrea is still occupying Tigrayan villages in Egela, Tahtay Adyabo, Irob, and the whole Western Zone of Tigray (GSKII01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023; TAKII02, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 7 June 2023; IRKII03, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 18 July 2023). Most of the localities in the vicinity of Hoya Medeb, Semhal, and May Hamato, as well as some parts of Ziban Guila and Erdi Jeganu, are under Eritrean occupation (GSKII01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023). Similarly, Endalgeda, Weratle, Alitena and Hegerelekoma of Irob Woreda, as well as Geter Badme, Badme Town, Gemhalo, Adi-Tsetser and some parts of Adeneyti, Lemlem and Adi-Aser in Tahtay Adyabo Woreda, are occupied by Eritrea (IRKII03, interview with DTesfaZT, face-to-face, 18 July 2023; TAKII02, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 7 June 2023).

The focus group discussants in Gerhu Sirnay stated that the Pretoria Agreement did not enable them to return to their homes (GSIDI02, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023). This was because according to an interviewee:

The procedures that lately developed into an agreement didn't include all warring parties to come to the table. At least one major actor in the war, Eritrea, is not part of the procedure. As a result, we are paying the cost of the shallow definition of the

warring parties being IDP since 3 November 2020. (GSIDI01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023)

In addition to this, the IDPs in Gerhu Sirnay showed the list of 17 civilians kidnapped by the Eritrean Defence Forces since the signing of the agreement (GSFGD02, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023). The key informant also indicated that three civilians were killed by Eritrean soldiers after the signing of the agreement (GSKII01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023).

The discussants in Aksum also questioned how the Pretoria Peace Agreement can bring justice, when all the signatories are Ethiopians only, while the perpetrators of the atrocities in Tigray are Ethiopians, Eritreans, Somalis, and other regional actors (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). One of the participants said:

We don't know what this agreement is meant by transitional justice. For transitional justice to work, there must be agreement on what happened, who did what to whom which the agreement didn't address at all. How transitional justice within one country could work in a regional war where UN-registered states invaded other registered states. If the claim in the Pretoria Agreement is to encourage impunity in the name of peace, then we will see how durable that peace will be. (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)

The participants in the discussions acknowledged that the agreement had temporarily de-escalated the state of war, it only contributed to strengthening Ethiopia's narrative on the internal conflict, ignoring that Eritrea and Somalia were directly involved in the war. An interviewee in Samre said:

The wrong problem definition of the 1998–2000 war was a border conflict where the international policy actors rushed to demarcate borders resulting in a stalemate for 20 years. This wrong problem definition of the Tigray war by the international policy actors which developed to the terms of the Pretoria Agreement may not have a different fate. This is because people who are being denied justice will not keep silent at all; they rather will wait for the right time to come for them. Unless there is a paradigm shift in the definition of the Tigray war, I feel there may be another cycle of war because, not I am pessimistic rather, the trends so far showed me the same. (SMIDI16, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023)

The interviewees also mentioned that the African Union (AU), an organisation that claimed that the Tigray war was a legitimate act to preserve Ethiopia's unity and stability, should have been subject to investigation on its responsibility for enabling the atrocities in Tigray, and that it was wrong that the AU was asked to play a mediation role in establishing the agreement (SHIDI07, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 4 June 2023; SMIDI13, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023).

The discussants in Aksum indicated that they saw the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement as inadequate when it is then observed that the United Nations Investigation Team on Ethiopia was denied access to Tigray by the Ethiopian government (AXFGD01, focus group interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).

Discussion

The findings not only confirm the involvement of Eritrea in the Tigray war, but also suggest that its presence in Tigray was preplanned and purposefully designed, on the orders of the Eritrean line of command from the top. In this discussion the findings of the interviews and FGDs are discussed, comparing them with the available literature and considering the conceptual framework of this study.

Background: A history of recurrent war

Having established Eritrea's involvement in the war, the next question is: What was its motive for participation? The relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea had been historically contested over time, especially during changes of regimes. The Haile Selassie and Derg regimes took diplomatic and military measures to impede the Eritreans' struggle for independence, while the EPLF and TPLF complemented each other enabling them to be the sole representatives of the armed struggles in their respective areas (Reid, 2021). However, important differences were observed in ideology, military tactics, and the definition of nationality, which reinforced the rift between the parties (Reid, 2021; Young, 1996). Following the downfall of the Derg regime, both parties seemed to settle in as

‘normal’ political actors, and the international policy actors acclaimed their leaders as ‘princes’ of an African Renaissance (Perlez, 2000). But the hope of peace for the Horn of Africa (Henze, 1991) was short-lived, followed by the 1998–2000 war. The international community, including the US, UN, and Organization of African Unity, oversaw the border demarcation-based Framework Agreement, which resulted in a two-decade stalemate between Eritrea and Ethiopia. According to the informants of this research, although the international policy actors aimed to bring peace and stability to the region, they based their efforts on the incorrect definition of the problem as border conflict. Hence, the main reasons for the conflict were not addressed in the Framework Agreement, sowing the seeds for future conflict. The issue of fluid nationality and the frictions emerging over ‘belonging’ of the populations north and south of the Mereb River gave rise to the hostile involvement of Eritrea in the Tigray war. The Eritrean leadership has an interest in preserving an Eritrean national identity as different from its shared Tigrayan roots.

The Eritrea-Ethiopia Joint Declaration of Peace

According to the findings of this research, the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Ethiopia and Eritrea enabled Eritrea to regain its destabilisation role in the Horn of Africa by lifting the sanctions. The informants compared this agreement with the short-lived honeymoon period (1993–1998) following the signing of the Asmara Pact, when relations were not institutionalised.

Selassie and Van Reisen (2019) explained the Eritrean people were not able to reap the dividends of the 2018 Peace Agreement, while Stigant and Phelan (2019) stated that the 2018 Peace Agreement depended solely on the individual relationships of PM Abiy Ahmed and President Isayas Afwerki, which was inadequate and even risky. Melicherová *et al.* (2024) found that the hostilities expressed by Eritrea against Tigray began openly in January 2018, when President Isayas declared “Game over, Woyane” to Tigray – which was prior to the Declaration of Peace. At the time, this message was not interpreted by the international community as a declaration of war against Tigray. However, any peace efforts at the grassroots level were halted on a practical level by the closing of the borders by Eritrea, a

few months after signing the Declaration of Peace. According to the informants, the intention of the 2018 Declaration of Peace, for Ethiopia and Eritrea to join forces to mobilise against Tigray, became apparent when Eritrea and Ethiopia started coordinating the mobilisation of their armies.

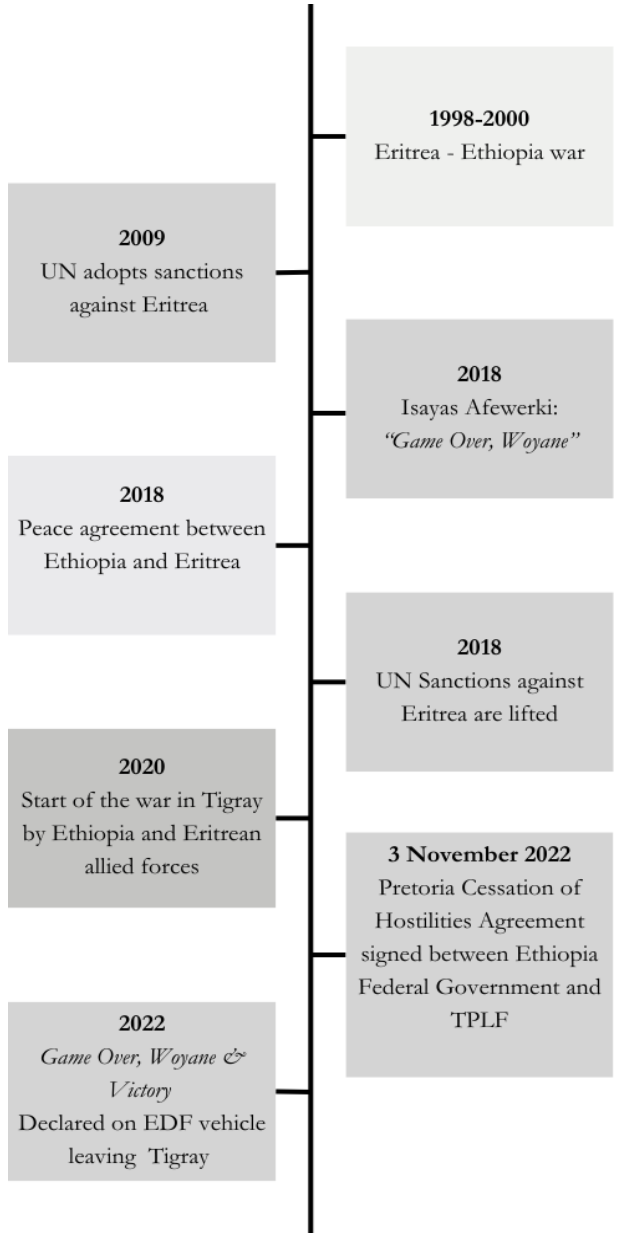


Figure 4.3. Timeline of Tigray war

When Eritrean troops left the theatre of war in Tigray in 2023, the EDF again announced ‘Game over, Woyane’, as a message of victory and intimidation, intended to instil fear among the people of Tigray (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024).

Involvement of Eritrea in the war

The findings of this research indicate that Eritrea had already declared war on Tigray in 2018, following the disclosure of its aim to perpetrate a campaign to implement the policy referred to as ‘Game over’. Alongside with the military build-up, Eritrea issued a statement on 31 October 2020 accusing the TPLF of impeding regional peace and stability (Shabait, 2020). The President Debretsion of the Tigray regional government stated: “We have prepared our military of Special Force not in need of a war, but if the worst comes” (Medihane, 2020).

Former Eritrean Defence Minister Mesfin Hagos said that the Eritrean and federal Ethiopian military had an ad hoc base in Gherghera, on the outskirts of Asmara, where the units were expected to be the hammer and the Northern Command the anvil to defeat the TPLF (Mesfin, 2020). He also indicated that in the 48 hours before the TPLF fired a missile at Asmara on 14 November 2020, local sources counted close to 30 military airplanes flying in thousands of soldiers from Ethiopia (Mesfin, 2020).

Some international actors, including the US, explained the participation of Eritrea as being triggered by the rocket attack on Asmara on 14 November 2020, but by that time Eritrean soldiers had already captured Badme, Gemhalo, Adi-Tsetser and Sheraro in alliance with ENDF and Amhara forces. Residents of Hoya Medeb who were displaced on 3 November 2020 also indicated that Eritrean soldiers killed civilians on their way to Gerhu Sirnay. Van Reisen, Berhe and Smits (2021) reported that Eritrean soldiers were seen in Gerhu Sirnay in the early morning of 4 November 2020, killing civilians in the town. This indicates that Eritrea was a major actor in designing, as well as perpetrating, the Tigray war, which gave the war a regional nature from the beginning.

Van Reisen, Berhe and Smits (2021) also found that Eritrean soldiers entered Tigray on 2 November 2020, two days before the war was

declared to have begun. Another military mobilisation witnessed by the informants was that the Northern Command of ENDF was in position to dismantle the political leadership of Tigray in coordination with the commandos who landed at Alula Aba Nega Airport in Mekelle late on the evening of 3 November 2020. Participants in this research confirmed the events that night, earlier described by Van Reisen, Berhe and Smits (2021).

Social media sources indicate that on 1 November 2020 16 buses of ENDF soldiers were mobilised from a camp in Shilaabo city in the Somalia region (Faysal, 2020). Media reports confirmed the participation of Eritrea early in the war. According to news media Reuters (Reuters, 2021) the Eritrean army was complementing the military campaigns of the ENDF on all possible fronts including Zalambesa. Eritrean soldiers indiscriminately massacred civilians in Zalambesa town on 13 November 2020 (Tigrai Online, 2021).

The US called Eritrea's reaction to the rocket attacks from Tigray 'restraint', indicating the war was started internally between Ethiopia and Tigray. The excerpt from the BBC news report on 18 November 2020 stated:

The US says it is concerned by what it calls a "blatant attempt to cause regional instability" by local forces in Ethiopia's Tigray region after they launched rocket attacks last weekend against neighbouring Eritrea... The rocket attacks on the Eritrean capital, Asmara, were a sign of how the internal conflict in Ethiopia could spread to the rest of the Horn of Africa... The US said it admired "Eritrea's restraint", which the State Department said had helped "prevent the further spreading of the conflict". (US Embassy in Ethiopia, 2020)

The assessment by the US that Eritrea was showing restraint was posted on the Ethiopia Foreign Ministry's website (MFA, 2021). While the US State Department officially stated it that it 'admired' Eritrea for not engaging in the internal war, the EDF had reached the edge of Aksum and was fighting along with ENDF, Amhara Fano, and Amhara Special Forces.

Collaboration with Amhara Special Forces

Abere Adamu, the late Police Commissioner of the Amhara Region confirmed that the Amhara Special Forces under his command had

made preparations for the war in Tigray long before 4 November 2020. He was quoted as saying:

It is history and let me tell you what happened during this time. Amhara region police and Temesgen Tiruneh who was the President of the Amhara region [at the time], already knew that this thing was going to happen, especially TPLF's preparation, as they were next door to us. Therefore we have already done our homework. And accordingly, deployment of forces had taken place in our borders from east to west. The war started that night after we had already completed our preparations. (Addis Standard, 2021)

Abere Adamu disclosed the communication he had with his subordinate who mobilised and positioned the Amhara Regional Special Forces in the war field close to Humera. He said:

After that, we were all at work. A little later Assistant Commissioner Biset – Assistant Commissioner in the police sector is equivalent to that of Brigadier General – and I wish I could call him as such because that is a familiar title. He called me again and told me that it was going as per our discussion. What we have talked about was, because it is now in the past let me make it clear for you today: with those within [ENDF Northern Command members], with whom we had close relations, especially with those members of the mechanised forces stationed near Humera we had relations with them and we have already studied how to retrieve the force to come to us if something happened. (Addis Standard, 2021)

The Commissioner further revealed that not only was he aware, but he also had consultations about the war before it started. He stated:

So when I and Commissioner Biset say “according to what we discussed” we understand [each other] what we were saying. What it meant was to make members [ENDF Northern Command] of the steel-clad mechanised forces come to us under the protection of our Special Forces, and after they reached us, to commander them to turn back to face the enemy. So he asked me “They are coming, what do I do with them” so I told him to divert them back to face the enemy. He did it. The armored mechanised members that we provided protection and retrieved from there protected our forces. And the infantry marched in. You all know what happened next. This is how the war started; this was the day. [...Audience clap...]. (Addis Standard, 2021)

Amhara Regional State Police Commissioner then informed the ENDF Chief of Party that their plan, made long before the war was declared, enabled them to celebrate joy. Abere said:

In the process, after the war started and after we had allied the armoured mechanised members with our forces, I called General Birhanu Jula [ENDF Chief of Staff]. General we have retrieved your forces [ENDF] and allied them with our [Amhara] forces. I asked him to bring down a directive of alignment between ENDF and Amhara Forces. At times of war, there is this language of directive of alignment otherwise there could emerge incidents in which allies end up hitting each other. So we need to do that and when I told it to General Birhanu, his speech [response] was a mix of joy and doubt. Joy because we retrieved the armoured mechanised forces and directed them to face the enemy. I doubt it because I think he wondered how that could be possible. That is what I understood from his tone. In any case, I told him what was done was done and asked him to give us the alignment directive. And he agreed; the war continued that way. (Abbay Media, 2020; Addis Standard, 2021)

Border localities in Egela stated that both armies, the ENDF and EDF, crossed the Belesa border with Tigray, killing any civilians they encountered, in the early morning of 4 November 2020 hours before the war was declared (GSFGD02, focus group interview with DT, face-to-face, 8 July 2023). The federal government framed the war as caused by a surprise attack by TDF on the ENDF Northern Command, but the former TPLF official Sekoutoure Getachew described it as a “pre-emptive strike” (EBC, 2020; Dimtsi Weyane Television, 2020).

Evidence today shows that ENDF, EDF, and the Amhara Special Forces prepared a military offensive long before 4 November 2020. The attack on the Northern Command in Tigray was the result of prior military developments. Evidence shows that the parties to the war had mobilised their military capacities beforehand.

Cessation of Hostilities Agreement – without Eritrea

The African Union saw the Tigray war as Ethiopia’s internal legitimate act to preserve national unity and stability, as expressed in the Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) meeting hosted by Djibouti in the third week of December 2020. The Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC) said that

Ethiopia took ‘legitimate’ military action in its Tigray region to preserve the country’s unity and stability. Speaking after the conclusion of a meeting of regional leaders on Sunday evening, AUC Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat said Ethiopia’s military campaign in its Tigray Region was “legitimate for all states” (Ethiopia News Agency, 2020).

The 2022 Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement followed the same logic and defined the war as a local conflict, bringing only the Ethiopian government and TPLF to the negotiating table. Although the agreement discussed transitional justice, it did not say anything about how the accountability of Eritrea would be addressed.

According to this research, more than eight months into the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, Eritrea still occupies: Hoya Medeb, Semhal, May Hamato; parts of Ziban Guila and Erdi Jeganu in Egela Woreda; Endalgeda, Weratle, Alitena and Hagerelekoma in Irob Woreda; Geter Badme, Badme Town, Gemhalo, Adi-Tsetser and some parts of Adeneyti and Lemlem in Tahtay Adyabo, as well as the whole Western Zone of Tigray. The continuation of indiscriminate killing, kidnapping, and looting are among the atrocities that Eritrea is perpetrating in the villages of Tigray that it still occupied, despite the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement.

The participants in this research claimed that the international community failed to address the root causes of the cycles of war, atrocities, and migration in the Horn of Africa. Deleersnyder (2021) also found that the European Union and the African Union’s early warning mechanisms had not been able to prevent the escalation of the Tigray crisis. According to Verhoeven and Woldemariam (2022), the US neither succeeded in achieving peace and security in Ethiopia nor in the Horn of Africa. The scholars argued:

Instead of pursuing a careful approach that sought to place guardrails on the transition, particularly through the promotion of national consensus and a transitional roadmap, Washington effectively underwrote Abiy’s regime consolidation project through unconditional political support. The effect was to create massive problems of “moral hazard” – excessively risky policies by Abiy on the

understanding that the United States backed him to the hilt. (Verhoeven & Woldemariam, 2022)

Eritrea utilised the opportunity presented by the lifting of UN sanctions to mobilise resources to stage the Tigray war. The 2018 Peace Agreement did not address the need for peace by the communities on the two sides of the Mereb River, resulting in the bloodiest war since the world wars, with hundreds of thousands killed and more than 2 million others displaced.

Conclusion: A regional war by design

The research explored the historical, linguistic, and ethnic roots, and geographic proximity between Eritrea and Ethiopia, particularly focusing on Tigray, to understand the friction and cycles of war between them. Key points from the research include:

Historical contestations of statehood: The friction between Ethiopia and Eritrea is rooted in their historical and phenomenological contestations of statehood. Eritrean nationalism, influenced by its colonial master Italy, contrasts with the partially common Eritrean and Ethiopian ethnic roots in Tigray and the Aksumite civilisation. The common roots foster a sense of connectedness between the north and south of the Mereb River. This common ancestry in the highlands creates a complex sense of connectedness across the Mereb River, intertwining the identities of both nations.

Eritrean influence: The Eritrean leadership aspires to interfere in Ethiopia's affairs and establish a hegemonic influence in the Horn of Africa.

Post-independence conflict: After a brief honeymoon period post-1993 independence, Eritrea and Ethiopia engaged in a bloody war from 1998 to 2000. The Tigray war is seen as a continuation of the unresolved issues between the two countries, with Eritrea preparing for two decades to take revenge.

International perception: The international community initially defined the conflict as a border dispute, celebrating the 2018 Eritrean-Ethiopian Peace Treaty and lifting the UN sanctions. Therefore, the warning by Eritrean President Isayas that he would bring down Tigray

(‘Game over, Woyane’) declared in January 2018, was downplayed, and the war was wrongly framed as an domestic issue for Ethiopia.

Coordinated military action: Leading up to the Tigray war, Eritrea and Ethiopia coordinated military deployments. Ethiopian Airlines conducted flights to Asmara carrying soldiers and equipment, and multiple military divisions were positioned to attack Tigray from various fronts.

International community’s role: The international community’s response, particularly the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, failed to address the root causes of the war in Tigray and Eritrea’s role. To this day, villages in Tigray remain occupied by Eritrean forces.

Grassroots peacebuilding: Despite the political and military conflicts, communities on both sides of the Mereb River share socio-economic, cultural, and religious ties and have an interest in peace. The research indicates that these border communities have a clear understanding of the drivers of the war and are capable of driving peacebuilding efforts if given the opportunity.

In summary, the research highlights the deep-rooted historical, political, and socio-economic factors contributing to the cycles of war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, emphasising the potential for grassroots peacebuilding amidst ongoing conflict and international missteps.

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Authors' contributions

Daniel Tesfa is a PhD student and he put together the first version of this chapter. He prepared the study-plan, the research approach and methodology, and conducted the research independently, collected the primary data, and he carried out the data analysis. Tesfa provided the first draft for this chapter. Mirjam Van Reisen provided input for the theoretical considerations for this chapter. Mirjam Van Reisen advised on the approach of the chapter, reviewed all the versions, and restructured the text. This work has been carried out as part of a PhD study.

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”.

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