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The Unfolding Conflict in Ethiopia

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Conflict is spreading in Ethiopia, where eight opposition groups have formed an armed alliance against the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, and the country may be heading toward war with neighboring Eritrea. Ethiopia's overlapping rebellions and its mounting tensions—not only with Eritrea but also with Egypt and Sudan—threaten to spur a broader regional conflict in which Middle East powers could take sides.

The governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea have traded allegations for over a year: Eritrea asserts that Ethiopia—landlocked since Eritrea became independent in 1993—seeks war as a pretext to forcefully acquire sovereign access to the sea, and Ethiopia has accused Eritrea (and Egypt) of waging a proxy conflict through rebel groups. U.S. officials have sought to defuse tensions, but both Ethiopia and Eritrea appear to be preparing for war.

Congress was active on Ethiopia during the deadly 2020-2022 war in northern Ethiopia, and some Members of Congress have since expressed concern about human rights abuses, tensions with Eritrea, and the prospect of another conflict in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region. Several Members have expressed alarm over the conflict and called for deescalation.

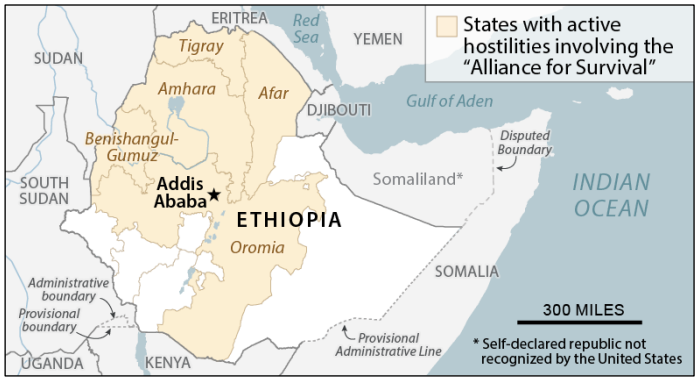
The Horn of Africa is home to several of the world's worst humanitarian crises, including the largest, in neighboring Sudan, and the situation in Ethiopia threatens to further strain an aid system stretched by aid cuts and competing crises. At a time when the Red Sea region already faces threats emanating from the war in Yemen, a war between Ethiopia—Africa's second most populous country—and Eritrea could be destabilizing and further undermine efforts to counter terrorism in the region.

Prelude to Another Conflict in Tigray

Almost four years ago, the Ethiopian government and Tigray's longtime ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), signed the November 2022 Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA), stopping one of the deadliest wars of the 21st century. The governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea were aligned in that war against the TPLF, which had been the dominant party in Ethiopia's ruling coalition from 1991 until 2018, when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power.

The war divided Ethiopia along ethnic lines, spurring a massive humanitarian crisis, famine, and widespread atrocities. The State Department determined that all parties to the conflict committed war crimes, members of the Ethiopian and Eritrean militaries and allied forces from the Amhara region of Ethiopia committed crimes against humanity, and Amhara forces committed ethnic cleansing in western Tigray. UN human rights experts assessed that Ethiopia's government and its allies used starvation as a weapon in Tigray and stated that further investigation is needed to determine the possible commission of genocide. A year after the CoHA's signing, they warned that the human rights situation in Ethiopia remained serious, with conflicts ongoing in other parts of the country and an acute risk of further atrocity crimes.

Figure 1. Map of Ethiopia



Source: CRS graphic. Areas of AFS-related hostilities based on public reporting.

The CoHA was not a comprehensive peace deal. Its signatories committed to cease hostilities, restore constitutional order, form an interim government for Tigray leading to elections, and engage in a political dialogue to resolve their differences. The deal linked the disarming of the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) to the concurrent withdrawal of foreign and non-federal military forces from Tigray. Eritrea and Amhara forces were not party to the negotiations, however, and the federal government did not enforce their withdrawal. Some Eritrean troops remained, and Amhara forces continued to occupy western Tigray, leaving up to 800,000 people displaced and dependent on dwindling aid. Some reportedly died of starvation in late 2025.

The TDF began disarming in 2023, but its demobilization was underfunded and stalled in 2025. Meanwhile, a power struggle linked to the CoHA and its selective implementation led Tigray's pre-war leadership to push for the ouster of the interim government head, Getachew Reda—who had represented the TPLF in the CoHA negotiations—in early 2025. The federal government postponed elections that were expected in 2025 for Tigray, and the election board revoked the TPLF's party registration. It then recognized other Tigray parties, including a new splinter party led by Getachew, whom Abiy appointed to his cabinet. The TPLF declared that the 2026 elections would not take place in Tigray unless it could compete in them.

A new armed group, the Tigray Peace Force (TPF), emerged in 2025. Composed of ex-TDF fighters, it vowed to liberate Tigray from the TPLF and clashed with Tigray forces several times. The TPLF accused the government of backing the TPF, including with drone strikes, and of a renewed blockade that restricted fuel, federal funds for public services, and medicines.

The TDF and federal troops clashed directly in early 2026, fueling fears of a return to war as Abiy termed the TPLF "traitors" working to "dismantle Ethiopia" and surged troops to Tigray's borders. The fighting stopped, but there were signs that both sides were preparing for war, with reports of forced recruitment by both sides. Fighting resumed in early August and escalated, with increasingly frequent drone strikes in Tigray.

Opposition Alliance

On September 20, the TPLF and six other groups announced a new coalition, the Alliance for Survival (AFS). The alliance links disparate groups from seven regions that have pledged to collectively defend themselves "against the devastating war declared upon us"; overthrow Abiy's "personalist, dictatorial and genocidal regime"; form a transitional government; and hold a dialogue on a new constitution. Among the groups is a faction of the Fano—Amhara militia who rebelled in 2023—and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), which has waged an insurgency since 2018. There has been little media coverage of the ongoing conflicts in Amhara, where the government has reportedly lost control of large areas since 2023, and Oromia (Ethiopia's most populous region and Abiy's home area). The government seeks to control the narrative around the conflicts and restricts press coverage of them, per press freedom groups.

Evolving Conflict

On the day of the AFS statement, a drone hit a convoy carrying U.S. food aid in Tigray. It was one over two dozen airstrikes attributed to the Ethiopian military in Tigray from early August to September 23, when the TPLF, which had reasserted control of Tigray in May, took control of Tigray's airports and traded blame with federal authorities as heavy fighting unfolded across northern Ethiopia. TPLF forces joined their AFS allies in battles in Afar and Amhara but lost ground to a counteroffensive by the military and government-aligned TPF. The role of Tigrayan fighters in the joint operations against the TPLF has underscored that Tigrayans are divided in the current conflict.

Ethiopia has expanded its drone arsenal since 2020-2022 war, using drones in its counterinsurgency campaigns in Amhara, Oromia, and, more recently, Tigray. Reported strikes on several military installations across the country suggest the AFS may also have some limited drone capacity. Joint military-TPF operations forced the TPLF to withdraw from Tigray's capital in early October, and Abiy has since announced a new caretaker government for the region and pledged to hold elections there within six months. The TPLF has rejected the authority, terming it illegitimate. Fighting continues in parts of Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, and Benishangul-Gumuz, home to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile River.

Regional Tensions

The Horn of Africa has a history of border disputes and proxy conflicts. Ethiopia and Eritrea fought a border war from 1998 to 2000 that, unresolved, led to reported proxy support. Prime Minister Abiy pursued rapprochement with Eritrea in 2018, and they were allies in the 2020-2022 war. Tensions have risen since 2023, however, and both have cultivated ties with the other's opposition groups. Abiy began to publicly describe Ethiopia's lack of sea access as an "existential" matter (it relies on ports in Djibouti and Somalia), and he has referred to its loss of coastline (with Eritrea's secession) as a historic "mistake." State media outlets broadcast stories describing Ethiopia's quest for sea access as a defining national ambition and a strategic imperative. Abiy is rebuilding the country's navy, with Russian support, and has held military parades hinting at an ambition to reclaim Eritrea's port of Assab. (Ethiopia has also recently acquired new fighter jets and air defense systems from Russia.)

Ethiopia's quest for sovereign sea access spurred tensions with Somalia in 2024. Abiy's reported offer to recognize the self-declared republic of Somaliland in exchange for coastline on the Gulf of Aden prompted outrage from Somalia. Turkey mediated between the two countries, but the situation led Somalia toward closer ties with Eritrea and Egypt, which has a long-running dispute with Ethiopia over the GERD. Egypt, heavily reliant on the Nile, views the GERD as an existential threat.

Ethiopia's unfolding conflict overlaps with the war in Sudan, which has been fueled by Middle East rivalries. Sudan's military-led government accuses Ethiopia of helping the United Arab Emirates (UAE) aid the insurgent Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and enabling drone attacks on Sudan from its territory. Some reports suggest that Ethiopia, a UAE ally, has facilitated RSF supply lines and incursions into Sudan. Ethiopia, for its part, asserts that Sudan has provided support to the TPLF.

Ethiopia has accused Eritrea, Egypt, and Sudan of fueling its internal conflicts and in early October broke ties with Eritrea and expelled an Egyptian diplomat. Egypt subsequently hosted a summit with Eritrea, Sudan, and Somalia, pushing back on Ethiopia's positions on the Nile and sea access. Ethiopia has since accused Eritrea of moving troops into Tigray and reportedly hit them with drones. Eritrea denied the allegation and has framed it as a declaration of war.

U.S. Engagement

The Trump Administration has sought to strengthen relations with Ethiopia and, at the same time, reset long-strained ties with Eritrea. President Trump has also offered to mediate between Ethiopia and Egypt. (His 2020 effort did not resolve the dispute.) U.S. officials describe the relationship with Ethiopia as a "close partnership" and have sought to deepen commercial ties, notably between Boeing and Ethiopian Airlines, Africa's largest carrier. The Administration has reduced U.S. foreign aid for Ethiopia, including humanitarian assistance for the country.

The Administration moved to terminate Temporary Protected Status for Ethiopia in late 2025, asserting there was "no longer an armed conflict that poses a serious threat to the personal safety of returning Ethiopian nationals." The Administration has taken since steps to enable security cooperation, waiving security assistance restrictions required under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act (Title IV of P.L. 110-457) based on the government's reported use of child soldiers and terminating the U.S. arms embargo imposed during the 2020-2022 war. The Administration allowed the Ethiopia-related national emergency established in 2021 to expire in September 2026, ending sanctions imposed on Eritrea's military and ruling party for their role in the last Tigray war. (No Ethiopians were sanctioned.)

U.S. official remarks on Ethiopia's conflict have been limited, but some have called out TPLF leaders, on whom the State Department imposed visa restrictions in June. U.S. officials condemned the September strike on the aid convoy but did not attribute responsibility for it. Officials have urged Ethiopia and Eritrea "to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of their neighbors" and return to dialogue. Per Secretary Rubio, "The last thing the world needs right now is another war."

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