



PERSPECTIVES

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Conflict in Ethiopia Extends Greater Middle East's Arc of Crisis

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Ethiopia, an African darling of the international community, is sliding toward civil war as the coronavirus pandemic hardens ethnic fault lines. The consequences of prolonged hostilities could echo across East Africa, the Middle East, and Europe.

Fighting between the government of Nobel Peace Prize-winning Ethiopian PM Abiy Ahmed and Tigrayan nationalists in the north could extend an evolving arc of crisis that stretches from the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict in the Caucasus, civil wars in Syria and Libya, and mounting tension in the Eastern Mediterranean into the strategic Horn of Africa.

It would also cast a long shadow over hopes that the two-year old peace agreement with neighboring Eritrea that earned Ahmed the Nobel prize would allow Ethiopia to tackle its economic problems and ethnic divisions.

Finally, it would raise the specter of renewed famine in a country that Ahmed was successfully positioning as a model of African economic development and growth.

The rising tensions come as Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan failed to agree on a new negotiating approach to resolving their years-long dispute over a controversial dam that Ethiopia is building on the Blue Nile River.

US President Donald Trump recently warned that downstream Egypt could end up "blowing up" the project, which Cairo has called an existential threat.

Fears of a protracted violent confrontation heightened after the government recently mobilized its armed forces, one of the region's most powerful and

battle-hardened militaries, to quell an alleged uprising in Tigray that threatened to split one of its key military units stationed along the region's strategic border with Eritrea.

Tension between Tigray and the government in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa has been mounting since Ahmed earlier this year diverted financial allocations intended to combat a biblical -cale locust plague in the north to confront the coronavirus pandemic.

The tension was further fueled by a rejection by Tigray of a government request to postpone regional elections because of the pandemic and Ahmed's declaration of a six-month state of emergency. Tigrayans saw the moves as dashing their hopes for a greater role in the central government.

Tigrayans charge that reports of earlier Ethiopian military activity along the border with Somalia suggest that Ahmed was planning all along to curtail rather than further empower the country's Tigrayan minority.

Although only five percent of the population, Tigrayans have been prominent in Ethiopia's power structure since the demise in 1991 of Mengistu Haile Mariam, who ruled the country with an iron fist. They assert, however, that Ahmed has dismissed a number of Tigrayan executives and sidelined businessmen in the past two years under the cover of a crackdown on corruption.

Like Turkey's Erdoğan in the Caucasus, the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, Ahmed may be seeing a window of opportunity at a moment when the US is focused on its cliffhanger presidential transition, leaving the US African Command with no clear direction from Washington on how to respond to the escalating tension in the Horn of Africa.

Escalation of the conflict in Tigray could threaten efforts to solidify the Ethiopian-Eritrean peace process; persuade Eritrean leader Isaias Afwerki, who has no love lost for Tigray, to exploit the dispute to strengthen his regional ambitions; and draw in external powers like Turkey, the UAE, and Qatar, who are competing for influence in the Horn.

The conflict further raises the specter of ethnic tension elsewhere in Ethiopia, a federation of ethnically defined autonomous regions against the backdrop in recent months of skirmishes with and assassinations of ethnic Amhara, violence against Tigrayans in Addis Ababa, and clashes between Somalis and Afars in which dozens were reportedly injured and killed.

Military conflict in Tigray could also accelerate the flow of Eritrean migrants to Europe, where they already account for a significant portion of Africans seeking better prospects in the EU.

A Balkanization of Ethiopia in a part of the world where the future of war-ravaged Yemen as a unified state is in doubt would remove the East African state as the linchpin with the Middle East and create fertile ground for operations by militant groups.

“Given Tigray’s relatively strong security position, the conflict may well be protracted and disastrous. [A war could] seriously strain an Ethiopian state already buffeted by multiple grave political challenges and could send shock waves into the Horn of Africa region and beyond,” warned William Davison, a senior analyst at the International Crisis Group.

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Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg’s Institute for Fan Culture.