

# Rising Tensions in Tigray Risk Regional Conflict

By the Africa Center for Strategic Studies

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*Rivalries among Tigrayan political leaders threaten to derail the process of reintegrating Tigray into Ethiopia's federal structure and could rapidly escalate into a wider conflict involving Eritrea and regional actors.*



Internally displaced persons walk past a Tigrayan flag in the Tshehaye IDP camp. (Photo: AFP/Michele Spatari)

Rapidly escalating tensions over the leadership of Tigray's transitional authority have put the region on edge with worries that the dispute could quickly spiral into a regional conflict. Coming more than 2 years after the ceasefire ending the conflict between the Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in which an estimated 600,000 people died, Tigray remains highly fragile with roughly 15 percent of the region's estimated 7 million residents still internally displaced.

The current crisis has been building pressure over the past year as a result of rivalries within the TPLF. These tensions have centered around criticisms by TPLF leader Debretsion Gebramichael of his former deputy, Getachew Reda, president of the Tigray Interim Administration (TIA). Debretsion has blamed Getachew and the TIA for the slow pace of implementing the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (COHA), signed in November 2022, that ended the 2-year-long war between the federal government and the TPLF. Debretsion has called for the dissolution of the TIA and attempted to undermine its authority. The TIA was set up under the COHA to serve as an interim authority to guide Tigray's reintegration back into Ethiopia's federal structure. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had tapped Getachew, as a senior TPLF leader with credibility among Tigrayans, to lead the interim body.

In an effort to defuse the rising tensions, Abiy announced on March 26 that Getachew would step down as president of the TIA. His replacement has yet to be named. It remains to be seen if this move will defuse the strains threatening to derail Tigray's transition.

The trigger for the recent escalation revolves around a dispute over control of the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF). Debretsion, the longtime leader of the TPLF, has claimed that authority for the forces does not fall under the TIA. Getachew, representing a younger cohort of TPLF leadership, had responded that while the TDF is a neutral body, it is administered by the TIA as part of its responsibility for overseeing the demobilization process outlined in the COHA. Getachew had accused the TPLF faction under Debretsion of destabilizing the region and attempting a “coup d’état.”

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On March 11 and 12, some elements of the TDF aligned themselves with Debretsion and took control of the regional radio station and mayor’s office in Mekelle as well as several towns along the Eritrean border, including parts of the Seharti district and Adigrat, the second largest population center in Tigray. Getachew had suspended three TDF commanders on March 10 while calling for federal government support. He also warned Eritrea against exploiting Tigray’s political turmoil.

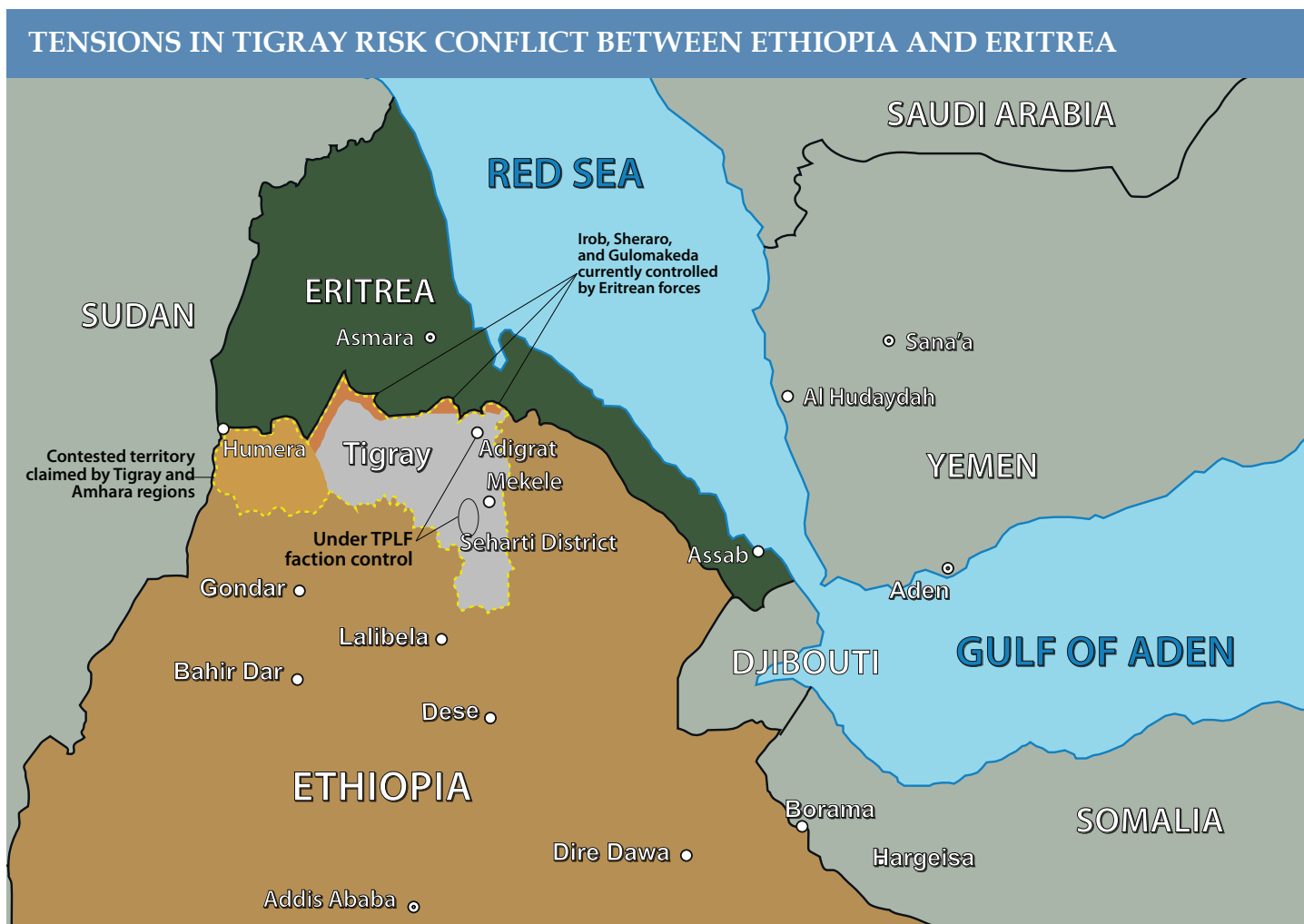
Lieutenant General Taddesse Werede (one of the two vice presidents of the TIA and head of the cabinet secretariat for Peace and Security) and General Tsadkan Gebretensae (the other vice president and former Commander of the TDF) have reiterated the neutrality of the TDF. Tsadkan has warned that Tigray cannot afford another war and that all avenues to avoid the conflict must be pursued urgently. This echoes the view of many Tigrayans who, fearing the region may be sliding back into conflict, have begun stockpiling food and withdrawing money from banks.

Given the proximity to Eritrea and reports that Eritrean troops remain in parts of Tigray in violation of the COHA, fears are rising that Eritrea may intervene in the factional battle between Tigrayan leaders. A sudden increase in Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) troop deployments in Tigray could also be seen as a provocation, leading to miscalculation and a wider regional conflict. Eritrea, meanwhile, has signaled to its citizens to be prepared for a potential mobilization.

## A LONG BUILD UP

The stage for a confrontation over the leadership of Tigray has been building for the past year.

During the TPLF Congress in August 2024, Debretsion was reelected as TPLF leader and several leading members, including Getachew, were suspended and eventually expelled. Getachew has claimed that the TIA’s efforts to govern without a party bias have been misperceived by some in the party as an anti-TPLF posture.



*Note: Designations of areas of control are illustrative and should not be interpreted as geographically precise.*

Since August, the Debretsion-led faction of the TPLF has been appointing parallel local administrators across the region and insisting that leaders chosen by the TIA step down.

In September 2024, Debretsion challenged Getachew's assertion that the TDF operates under TIA leadership. Debretsion contends that command of the armed forces exceeded the authority of the interim administration. While not explicitly stated, this position holds that authority for the TDF effectively rests with the TPLF.

In January 2025, 200 leaders of the TDF called for the dissolution and reconfiguration of the TIA in alignment with the Debretsion-led TPLF faction.

Further fueling the TPLF's grievance was the 3-month suspension of the party in February 2025 by the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) for failing to hold a general assembly within the designated 6-month timetable as part of its reregistration in accordance with the COHA.

## MOBILIZATION FOR WAR?

Fighting alongside the federal government forces during the 2020-2022 war against the TPLF, Eritrea reportedly continues to control parts of Irob and Sheraro districts along the Eritrean border. The presence of Eritrean forces is a violation of the COHA requirement that all foreign forces depart Ethiopia. This has been a point of frustration for Tigrayans and has heightened concerns that Eritrea could be a spoiler in the Tigray reintegration process.

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Despite being stretched by armed confrontations in the Amhara and Oromia Regions, the federal government has reportedly mobilized additional forces toward the Afar Region, which borders both Tigray and Eritrea. In a televised address to Parliament, however, Prime Minister Abiy stressed that Ethiopia has no intention of attacking Eritrea, describing Eritreans as “a brotherly and kind-hearted people.”

He also reiterated the federal government’s commitment to support the region’s reconstruction and ensure a peaceful political transition. Rather than backing a specific political faction in Tigray, Abiy has indicated that the government is focused on engaging with the TIA as a unified entity, irrespective of its leadership.

## STATUS OF THE COHA

Since the signing of the COHA between the federal government and the TPLF, notable progress has been realized with the disarmament of heavy weapons, the institution of a national transitional justice policy, and the expansion of humanitarian access for most of the region. However, perceived slowness in the implementation of certain aspects of the COHA are cited for the escalating strains within the Tigrayan political leadership. These are centered on 4 of the 15 articles in the agreement.

### *Article 5(3) – Humanitarian Access: Return and Reintegration of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees*

At the conclusion of the war, there were an estimated 2.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the Tigray region. Approximately half of these had returned to their home villages or been reintegrated as of January 2025, leaving roughly 870,000 IDPs to be resettled. Most of these are in the regional capital of Mekelle. Frustrated by the delays, IDPs in Mekelle have protested to both regional and federal authorities for a solution.

Their return is complicated by the sensitive political question over the jurisdiction of Western Tigray from which many of the remaining IDPs were displaced. The jurisdiction was a flashpoint during the conflict and saw some of the most vicious fighting between Amhara and Tigrayan militias. Authorities in both regions claim the territory, which the Amhara Region calls Welkait-Tsege-Setit-Humera. The status of the disputed territory was not addressed in the COHA, but Abiy has proposed a referendum to decide its status.



Implementation of this is problematic, however, with so many former residents displaced, and the villages now administered by Amhara regional authorities who claim the territory has historically been a part of Amhara.



Internally displaced persons gather under a statue of a dove as they check their names for food distributions at a school used as an IDP camp in Adwa, Tigray. (Photo: AFP/Michele Spatari)

## *Article 6 – Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR)*

Disarmament of heavy weapons proceeded rapidly following the signing of the COHA and is widely considered to have been completed.

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Demobilization and reintegration of troops have gone more slowly, however. Under the COHA, practical implementation of DDR is to be overseen by the ENDF and TDF with representatives of the African Union (AU). The National Rehabilitation Commission, which is supported by the United Nations Development Program, has identified 274,000 members of the TDF (out of 372,000 ex-combatants nationally) to be demobilized. Of these, 55,000 have been demobilized. An additional 75,000 TPLF ex-combatants have been identified as part of a second phase. The process has been delayed, however, due to funding shortfalls and the subsequent political rift within the TPLF.

As part of the ceasefire agreement, DDR was to be accompanied by the withdrawal of foreign and non-ENDF forces from Tigray. With Eritrean troops continuing to hold some border areas of Tigray, however, this issue has been a major point of contention

for Tigrayans. The continued presence of Amhara forces in the disputed Western Tigray jurisdiction has further amplified this grievance and anxiety on the part of Tigrayans.

## *Article 8 – International Boundaries and Federal Facilities*

The COHA required that the federal government secure the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ethiopia, including the Tigray Region. While less visible than during the conflict, the continued presence of Eritrean forces in border areas of Tigray, especially Irob, Gulomakada, and Sheroro districts, indicates that this provision has yet to be fully fulfilled. Residents in these districts have alleged ongoing abductions of youth by Eritrean forces, perpetuating a climate of fear.

## *Article 9 – Restoration of Federal Authority in the Tigray Region and Representation in Federal Institutions*

Under the terms of the COHA, once the other stipulations are fulfilled, the federal government is tasked with facilitating the reintegration and representation of Tigray in national federal institutions. The TIA was established to temporarily manage the region until this process was complete. Originally anticipated to have a 2-year timetable, the TIA's mandate was extended for a third year pending resolution of the other elements of the COHA.

### *An underlying issue is how the TPLF will be reintegrated into Ethiopia's political landscape.*

An underlying issue of Article 9 is how the TPLF will be reintegrated into Ethiopia's political landscape. The TPLF was delisted as a legal political party by the NEBE in January 2021 following the onset of hostilities. Since the end of the conflict, the TPLF has repeatedly requested to be reinstated to its pre-war legal status. While the TPLF designation as a terrorist organization was removed in March 2024, the NEBE has consistently insisted that the TPLF re-register as a new political party under the revised Party Registration and Ethics Reform Bill, a legal requirement for all parties. The TPLF leadership under Debretsion, however, has rejected the idea of re-registering, viewing it as an infringement on their party's rights.

## **MEDIATION BY REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ACTORS**

The COHA was signed under the auspices of the AU with the support of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the United Nations (UN), and the United States. In an effort to defuse tensions, the AU convened the signatories and mediators for a discussion on the status of implementation in February 2025. Former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, the lead AU mediator of the COHA, emphasized that unresolved issues must be addressed but they should not undermine or reverse the peace process. In a subsequent session of the UN Human Rights Council, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Ilze Brands Kehris affirmed that the Eritrean

Defense Forces remained in Tigray despite the COHA mandate for their departure and called for their immediate withdrawal to prevent future atrocities and derail the peace process. U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia Ervin Massinga has also visited Tigray to emphasize the importance of resolving differences through peaceful dialogue.

## RISKS OF A REGIONAL CONFLICT

As demonstrated during the 2020-2022 conflict in Tigray, a resumption of violence could quickly escalate with devastating consequences for Tigray and the wider Horn. Ethiopia's neighbors are more unstable than in 2022, risking compounded and unintended consequences. Sudan, South Sudan, and Somalia are all facing major conflicts. The war between rivaling generals in Sudan has become the world's worst humanitarian crisis. The regionalization of the Sudan conflict, with various Gulf states and other outside actors providing arms and funding to each side, has dramatically elevated the costs and duration of this conflict. Should a similar dynamic emerge in a renewed conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia and the Greater Horn could be destabilized for years, undermining the significant economic progress and investments in reconstruction that have been made since 2022.

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Neither Ethiopia nor Eritrea appear to be seeking an escalation. However, with multiple armed actors in close proximity, the risk of miscalculation and provocation by political spoilers is high. This is further complicated by the backdrop of Ethiopia seeking more predictable maritime port access to support its expanding trade relationships, an objective that Eritrea views as a potential claim on its Red Sea port of Assab.

The rising tensions generated by the intra-factional rivalry within the TPLF appear near an inflection point and have heightened the importance of urgent engagement by COHA mediators. Attempts to resolve the valid immediate grievances among Tigrayans are taking place within a broader context of finding a mutually acceptable path for reintegrating Tigray within Ethiopia's fraught ethnic federal governance model. This will necessitate sustained dialogue between Ethiopian and Tigrayan leaders, which will take time. Creating the time and space for this process to advance, therefore, is the larger near-term objective for mediators.

