

Violent Crisis in Ethiopia Threatens East African Regional Stability

Featuring Jessica Kocan



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A civil war between Ethiopia's central government and one of its regional states threatens security across East Africa. Ethiopia is Africa's second-most populous country and a US security partner; the humanitarian and security consequences of this domestic conflict have already begun to affect the surrounding region. The fighting has pushed refugees into Sudan, drawn in fighters from Eritrea, and created fertile ground for militant groups like Al-Shabaab to recruit and expand. On this episode of Overwatch, Jessica Kocan, an analyst from the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, discusses the Ethiopian conflict and the dangers it poses to US national security interests and the surrounding region.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War. I'm Jake Taylor. Ethiopian prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, came to power in 2018 as a reformer and was met with an outpouring of hope and enthusiasm from the international community. Abiy won the Nobel Peace Prize last year for reaching a peace deal with Eritrea, after nearly 20 years of hostility between that nation and Ethiopia. But now, Abiy's administration is in the spotlight for an ongoing conflict with one of Ethiopia's own regional states that began in early November. Ethiopia is Africa's second most populous country and a U.S. security partner. The humanitarian and security consequences of this domestic conflict have already begun to affect the greater East African region. Jessica Kocan, an analyst from the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute is with us today to talk about Ethiopia's current conflict and the dangers it poses to US national security interests in the surrounding region. Jessica, thank you so much for being with us today.

Jessica Kocan:

Thank you so much for having me.

Jacob:

Can you set the scene for us a little bit? What context should we have about Ethiopia and its position in East Africa?

Jessica:

Absolutely. So Ethiopia is one of the largest countries in Africa. It's the second most populous country on the continent with nearly 115 million people. It's got an important emerging economy with one of the highest GDP growth rates in recent years and has had a chance at real and necessary political and economic reforms. Ethiopia has been relatively stable in a very unstable region. Its neighbors include Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan, and it hosts hundreds of thousands of refugees. Ethiopia also houses the headquarters of the African Union and it's the world's largest contributor to peacekeeping forces. The country is also a key US security partner, including on counter-terrorism. But now, war has broken out between Ethiopia's federal government and the leaders of one of its regional states. The fighting has already had a serious humanitarian effect with tens of thousands of Ethiopian refugees fleeing into Sudan. This crisis puts Ethiopia's future stability in question and has repercussions for the whole region.

Jacob:

Thanks, Jessica. Now, how did this crisis begin?

Jessica:

So fighting broke out in early November between the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front or TPLF for short. The TPLF was Ethiopia's dominant political party for nearly three decades before Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018. Political reforms have been slow since then and the TPLF

has become increasingly isolated from national politics. Some TPLF members may even have been involved in an assassination attempt targeting Abiy in 2018. These tensions then escalated this past September.

Jacob:

Escalated how? What specifically happened in September?

Jessica:

Yeah. So the TPLF still control the Government of Tigray, one of Ethiopia's ethnically-based regional states. In September though, the TPLF defied the Federal Electoral Board's decision to postpone all national elections due to COVID-19, which was a major sign of insubordination to Abiy's administration. The TPLF saw the delayed elections as an attempt to extend Abiy's term and went ahead and held its own regional elections in Tigray in September. The federal government, of course, did not recognize these elections and then cut funding to the Tigray in response. Tensions then boiled over in early November when the TPLF attacked a federal military base in the Tigrayan capital called Mekelle.

Jacob:

So it sounds like that was the first violence of this particular crisis. The fighting started with the TPLF attacking federal forces, but what happened after that?

Jessica:

So afterward, federal forces focused their military campaign on capturing Mekelle, where the TPLF concentrated its military power. The city is also home to the region's administrative center. The federal forces' campaign included airstrikes and a multi-pronged advance to encircle the capital. There has also been fighting elsewhere in Tigray involving militias from a neighboring state called Amhara. Amhara militia men joined the fight against the TPLF, and the fighting has greatly effected civilians. It has displaced some of the roughly 100,000 Eritrean refugees living in Tigray and has caused nearly 50,000 Ethiopians to seek refuge in Sudan.

Jacob:

Now there have been some media reports of Eritrean involvement in the conflict. Eritrea being Ethiopia's northern neighbor, Ethiopia and Eritrea have historically not gotten along very well though that's gotten better in recent times, but have any foreign forces been involved in the recent fighting?

Jessica:

Yes. So Eritrea does support the Ethiopian federal government and the fighting, though the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments, of course, have denied Eritrea's direct involvement in the conflict. There were early reports of Ethiopian forces crossing into Tigray from Eritrea, which Abiy himself has admitted to. And then more recently we've seen reports of Eritrean force presence in Tigray. Eritrean forces have allegedly been fighting alongside Ethiopian forces with some unconfirmed reports of Eritrean troops even targeting Eritrean refugees in the region. The TPLF has retaliated by firing rockets at the Eritrean capital and other cities. Just for context too, the Eritrean leadership and the TPLF are historical enemies. The TPLF actually led Ethiopia during the most recent war with Eritrea.

Jacob:

I believe Ethiopia's prime minister declared victory in this particular conflict in late November, but has the fighting stopped? And regardless, what is the current status of the crisis?

Jessica:

You are correct. The Ethiopian government did claim victory when federal forces captured the regional capital

Mekelle on November 28th. The fighting has continued since. So the TPLF has withdrawn west of the city with leadership reportedly hiding in mountainous areas, but that hasn't been confirmed. The TPLF is experienced in guerrilla warfare. It's also important to note that information coming out of Tigray is extremely limited, but humanitarian organizations have reported that they can't access Tigray because of ongoing fighting.

Jacob:

What do you expect that we'll see next in this conflict?

Jessica:

The TPLF will wage a longterm insurgency in an attempt to recapture Mekelle and prevent both the federal and allied forces from gaining regional control. The implications of such an insurgency would include increasing humanitarian needs and prolonging the risk of sustained fighting within Ethiopia, beyond Tigray, as well as indirectly exacerbating ethnic violence across the country. The TPLF has vowed to continue fighting federal forces and has claimed recapturing regional cities suggesting that this will be a long-term fight. The fighting could come to an end though if federal forces defeat the TPLF, possibly by expanding regional control beyond to... Pardon me, if they expand regional control beyond Mekelle or if the TPLF accepts a federal administration in the region.

Jacob:

You mentioned violence elsewhere in Ethiopia, has this fighting in Ethiopia had any domestic effects beyond the Tigray region.

Jessica:

So unfortunately it has. The conflict risks fragmenting Ethiopia further along ethnic lines. Tigray's neighboring Amhara regional state has supported Ethiopian federal forces in the conflict. The ethnic Amhara are interested in reclaiming disputed territory from Tigray, risking a broader civil war in the country. Separately, Ethiopia has been plagued by ethnic violence in other regional states and the conflict has indirectly increased such violence, as federal troops deployed to Tigray from other Ethiopian regions. So for example, ethnic violence occurred in a town in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region of Southwestern Ethiopia in mid-November after federal troops withdrew from the area, likely to support fighting in Tigray. Even if the violence doesn't spread, the humanitarian effects will be severe. Ethiopia has already been suffering from a historic locust plague that has disrupted agriculture. The Tigray fighting is now getting in the way of efforts to control the locusts and all of these dynamics could worsen food insecurity and even push toward famine in the coming year.

Jacob:

You mentioned early on in the episode that Ethiopia is an important player in this part of the world. Is the conflict having effects on the surrounding region?

Jessica:

Yes, absolutely. Ethiopia's conflict risks causing friction among other African countries. It could lead to a border war with Sudan, which has already deployed troops to dispute a territory. In fact, Sudanese Armed Forces reclaimed territory from Ethiopian militiamen in Al-Fashqa triangle, which borders Ethiopia and Sudan after 25 years in early December. And then also, Ethiopia's domestic crisis creates new complications in the issue of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile. The rate at which Ethiopia fills this dam is an existential issue for Sudan and Egypt whose water supply is scarce and therefore depend on the Nile. The dam is a popular nationalist cause in Ethiopia and as Abiy deals with the country's current internal turmoil, he may be pressured to take a harder stance on filling the dam. If negotiations with Sudan and Egypt fail, there's a risk that they, especially Egypt, seek other ways of pushing back on Ethiopia, possibly by helping to sustain the TPLF insurgency. I haven't seen this kind of involvement yet and, while it's a worst case scenario, it is a possible one.

Jacob:

Does this conflict and, meaning specifically the conflict inside Ethiopia at the moment, involving the Tigray region, does it have any other implications for Ethiopia's neighboring countries that exclude warfare?

Jessica:

Yeah, it does. So Ethiopia's conflict also risks increasing insecurity in its neighboring countries, especially where it contributes to peacekeeping missions. So in Somalia, for example, the Somali government depends on foreign support to address security issues in the country, namely countering Al-Qaeda's East African affiliate Al-Shabaab. Ethiopian forces support military operations targeting Al-Shabaab in Somalia, but some Ethiopian forces have withdrawn from Somalia since the fighting in Tigray began to support fighting on the home front. Some of the remaining Ethiopian forces in Somalia even fought amongst themselves in a military base in Somalia in early December with Tigray members against non-Tigrays. This kind of in-fighting, of course, undermines the security mission in Somalia and it also sounds a warning about the cohesion of the Ethiopian military at large. The Ethiopian government also contributes to peacekeeping forces in disputed territory between Sudan and South Sudan. There have been reports of Ethiopian federal forces purging ethnic Tigray, Ethiopian soldiers from the mission over these ethnic tensions, causing concern for weakened security in that disputed territory as well.

Jacob:

Now, you mentioned that the Somali government relies on foreign military support to counter Al-Shabaab. Do you expect the Ethiopian conflict will impact the group in any way?

Jessica:

I do. So, I think Al-Shabaab will take advantage of the gaps slashed by the departing Ethiopian forces. Al-Shabaab has done this before, particularly in 2016, when some Ethiopian peacekeeping forces withdrew from central Somalia. The Al-Shabaab militants then moved into that territory to attack local leaders and seize land. Also, Ethiopia's withdrawal comes at a time as the U.S. prepares to withdraw its roughly 700 troops from Somalia by mid-January of next year. Somalia is also headed for a fraught election cycle. And so, all of these factors together mean that the security situation will erode in Al-Shabaab's favor over the next few months.

Jacob:

Now what about the possibility of Al-Shabaab activity picking up inside Ethiopia? Is that something that you could see happening?

Jessica:

Yeah, that's a good question. So I do think the conflict may allow Al-Shabaab militants from Somalia to expand into Ethiopia, but we haven't seen any strong indicators of this yet. So, for some context, Al-Shabaab seeks to expand control beyond the established Somali border, within which it primarily operates. The group seeks to form an Islamic state beyond that border in what it views as greater Somalia, which would be territory that encompasses parts of Kenya and Ethiopia. While Al-Shabaab doesn't currently have a foothold in Ethiopia, increased fighting in the country along ethnic and in some areas, religious lines, could create opportunities for the militants to insinuate themselves.

Ethiopian security forces actually reported arresting Al-Shabaab and Islamic State militants this past November for plotting attacks in the country. Though, militants have never conducted an attack in Ethiopia so far. It is possible that Al-Shabaab will seek to recruit ethnic Somalis from Ethiopia's Ogaden region, which is also known as the Somali region. And it's located in the country's south along the Somali border. Al-Shabaab has used this tactic of recruiting ethnic Somalis living in Kenya actually. Al-Shabaab also produced anti-Ethiopian propagan-

das recently as the summer, so it's possible that the group will seek outreach into Ethiopia.

Jacob:

Is there anything that you think the U.S. should do in response to this crisis?

Jessica:

That's definitely an important but tough question. Abiy's government has been extremely resistant to external pressure and he's kept tight control of the information space in Tigray. The U.S. has to thread the needle between pushing Abiy's government and the fighting and avoid elevating the TPLF or absolving it of its own responsibility. Two senators on the Foreign Relations Committee just introduced a resolution calling on the U.S. government to consider sanctions on any Ethiopian officials found responsible for human rights violations. And I think this is a positive step toward accountability. The U.S. should also continue to push for independent fact-finding missions. Separately, the U.S. would be wise to reevaluate the planned withdrawal from Somalia, especially as Al-Shabaab has expressed an intent to attack internationally, and has been taking steps toward that goal, like sending members to pilot training within the last year.

Jacob:

Jessica Kocan. Thank you so much for being with us today and sharing your expertise on this topic.

Jessica:

Thank you so much for having me, Jacob. It's been my pleasure.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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