The Prospects for Another War in Tigray

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Another war appears imminent in Tigray; this time the conflict threatens to engulf the region. Eritrea appears ready to join the fighting . Despite the heavy toll of the 2020–2022 war, both the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian government have resumed belligerent rhetoric. If fighting resumes, the underlying causes are the TPLF's pursuit of secession, Abiy Ahmed's authoritarian rule, and his territorial ambitions.

The TPLF has pursued independence since its formation in 1975 by advocating the right to self-determination; it has promoted a narrative rooted in historical exceptionalism and the right to self-determination. That vision matured into a program of statehood during the years the TPLF controlled the Ethiopian government. Between 1991 and 2018, it used state power to lay the political, economic, and military groundwork for secession. Ethnic federalism, introduced under the rhetoric of self-rule, eroded national cohesion. A constitutional clause granted regional states the right to secede unilaterally. Ethiopian nationalism was deliberately undermined; ethnic nationalism was systematically promoted.

Ethnic regions were later militarized through the creation of special forces that operated beyond constitutional limits, ostensibly for regional security. Tigray assembled the most powerful of these units—well-armed, well-trained, and well-structured, designed as a paramilitary force prepared to enforce constitutional claims to territory. These units appear intended to serve as the armies of the independent states they envisioned. In parallel to this build-up, heavy military equipment vital to national defense was transferred to Tigray under the pretext of countering threats from Eritrea. The TPLF later used its special forces and this hardware to wage war against the Ethiopian state.

Unrestrained by legal, political, or institutional checks, the TPLF exercised full control over the Ethiopian state. It used that power to extract the country's natural resources, seize physical assets, and divert financial capital. Under the guise of implementing market reforms recommended by the IMF and World Bank, it transferred state-owned enterprises to firms under its command. The TPLF used the state's economic apparatus and its control over the private sector to advance its long-term goal of Tigrayan independence. As the TPLF moved toward secession, Ethiopia stood primed for fragmentation, by its constitution, by its leaders, and by its institutions.

When a popular revolt removed the TPLF-led government in 2018, the leadership retreated to Mekelle and intensified its campaign for independence. The TPLF escalated its confrontation with the federal government through a series of provocative actions: holding regional elections in September 2020 in defiance of federal authority, expelling federal military officers from Tigray, obstructing troop movements and logistics, and organizing large-scale military parades to project force. Each move appears calculated to provoke a military confrontation with the central government. Convinced that the moment had arrived, the TPLF launched a coordinated assault on the Northern Command on November 4, 2020, as a decisive step toward secession. After two years of devastating war, it failed to achieve its long-term objective. On November 2, 2022, it accepted a cessation of hostilities under the terms of the Pretoria Agreement.

Support for secession has increased, fueled by the federal government's conduct during the war, particularly its decision to invite the Eritrean army into Tigray (Reuters). The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, once a bastion of unity, has splintered. Tigrayan clergy formed a separate synod and severed all ties with the central hierarchy. In the diaspora, former advocates of unity champion independence. Among educated Tigrayans, disillusionment runs deep.

Many interpreted the nationwide support for the federal war effort, mostly due to the TPLF's authoritarianism, as a broader denunciation of Tigrayan identity. For this group, the war was not a political confrontation, but a genocidal campaign. That belief has hardened into a dominant narrative: that civilian deaths were not accidental byproducts of conflict, but deliberate acts of extermination.

A rival project of state-building has emerged at the federal level, based on irredentism rather than ethnic autonomy. Abiy Ahmed, an authoritarian ruler backed by a narrow Oromo elite, has declared his intention to govern a unitary state stretching from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. He has repeatedly insisted that Ethiopia must secure a seaport, peacefully or by military force. Despite having no coastline, his government established a navy with France's assistance; he signed a memorandum of understanding with Somaliland to build a naval base—later cancelled—and has advanced a plan for an economic union encompassing Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia.Federal authorities have also provided weapons to factional leaders in Puntland and Jubaland to undermine the Somali government.

While economic integration offers benefits, Abiy's strategy to annex or dominate neighbouring states risks regional instability, diplomatic estrangement, and military confrontation. A government committed to external expansion is unlikely to tolerate internal disintegration. Tigrayan secessionism and Abiy's expansionism stand as twin causes of the impending war. The immediate triggers of renewed war have already surfaced. Abiy Ahmed can invoke a legal *casus belli* against Eritrea, which continues to occupy Ethiopian territory despite repeated demands from Western governments and multilateral organizations. Eritrea, in turn, could claim self-defence. The TPLF could justify a war by claiming that the federal government has failed to fully implement the Pretoria Agreement. Both sides blame each other for the collapse of the agreement and have resumed hostile rhetoric and provocative actions.

The TPLF, ignoring the Pretoria Agreement, has declared that it does not require federal permission to engage with Eritrea. Its leaders have publicly affirmed sovereignty, consistent with the constitutional framework. An Eritrean official has offered explicit support for Tigrayan independence; this has introduced an unpredictable external variable into an already volatile situation. On the federal side, the government has revoked the TPLF's legal status as a political party, eliminating what remained of the formal political channel. At the same time, Abiy launched a European tour on May 22, likely to secure diplomatic backing for a new campaign. The symmetry with the prelude to the first war is striking: escalating rhetoric, foreign lobbying, and mutual delegitimization. What unfolds is not a fresh crisis but the second act of a war poorly resolved.

The TPLF has fractured under the weight of the war it helped to unleash. An internal power struggle—driven by disputes over military conduct, political legitimacy, and personal ambition—split the organization in August 2024 into two factions: one led by Debretsion Gebremichael, the chair; the other by Getachew Reda, the vice chair. Each accuses the other of betraying the people of Tigray. The TPLF fighters are also divided. A large faction supports the Debretsion group, while Getachew's faction has secured the backing of armed groups in southern Tigray, reportedly trained by the Ethiopian government in the Afar region. These forces have pledged to defend the administrative structure he established. The likelihood of intra-Tigrayan armed conflict is high.

Tensions have escalated further as Getachew has leveled serious criminal accusations against the TPLF's military command. In interviews aired on government television on May 13 and 14, he alleged that senior generals committed war crimes, operated illegal gold mines, embezzled state funds, trafficked humans, smuggled arms, and stripped steel from public infrastructure for sale—even as the war was taking place. The accused commanders have denied all charges and denounced him as a traitor aligned with the federal government. He further reported that the number of registered TPLF fighters DDR had been inflated and that commanders had embezzled funds intended for their salaries. He accused the same officers of plotting to assassinate him. These are not casual allegations—they come from a man who served as deputy chair of the party, member of the executive, member of its wartime command, spokesperson during the conflict, head of the Pretoria delegation, and former regional president.

According to Getachew, the TPLF's military leadership has a vested interest in restarting the war to avoid accountability. He argues that peace would expose their crimes, while renewed conflict offers protection. As evidence, he cites the leak of secret peace talks in Djibouti between the TPLF and the federal government by one of the implicated generals. The federal government, upon learning of the leak, ended the negotiations. In another case,

he claims that when the federal government attempted resettlement of Tigrayans in contested areas, the TPLF commanders demanded that fighters accompany the returnees; the government refused. Getachew alleges the generals are using displaced civilians as “hostages” to obstruct reconciliation. He claims to hold documentary evidence supporting these accusations. While he describes the TPLF as a “criminal enterprise,” he occasionally softens the charge, placing blame on a few bad actors. This contradiction raises a crucial question: if an organization protects offenders and functions as a criminal network, can it still claim political legitimacy?

The conflict between the TPLF and the federal government has persisted, but alliances have shifted dramatically. During the first Tigray war, a coalition of federal troops, Eritrean forces, Amhara special forces, and the Fano militia fought the TPLF. That coalition has disintegrated. In April 2023, the federal government disbanded the Amhara special forces while retaining similar units in other regions. It then launched a military campaign to disarm the Fano, provoking armed resistance across the Amhara region. The government has struggled to suppress the rebellion and has lost control of large areas. It accuses the TPLF of aiding the Fano. At the same time, relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea have unraveled. Abiy Ahmed’s declaration that Ethiopia would obtain a seaport—by negotiation or by force—has pushed the two states into hostility.

In a startling reversal, the TPLF has begun to align with Eritrea, its former enemy. Reports suggest the Debretsion faction has initiated cooperation with Eritrean officials, despite Eritrea’s continued occupation of territories claimed by Tigray. Getachew alleges that senior TPLF commanders have coordinated military planning with Eritrean authorities. Gebru Asrat, the former Tigray regional president, has made similar claims.

Eritrea appears prepared to re-enter the war, this time as a TPLF ally. One Eritrean official has gone further and has expressed support for Tigrayan independence, as stated earlier. But given their history of mutual hostility, unresolved border disputes, and clashing ambitions, the alliance remains fragile. It may serve tactical needs, but it is unlikely to survive strategic realities. Strategic miscalculation is a crucial risk in this war, as it was in the previous one. During the first Tigray war, both the federal government and the TPLF overestimated their military capacity and underestimated their opponent’s. The war yielded no victory. Instead, both sides accepted a cessation of hostilities after enduring political crisis, economic hardship, and human catastrophe. The result crippled both actors.

Despite renewed threats, confrontational posturing, and aggressive rhetoric, neither side appears ready for war. In Tigray, the public is exhausted. People demand peace, basic services, the return of the displaced, and the restoration of infrastructure. The struggle for basic needs outweighs the desire to engage in another war. While support for independence remains high, many Tigrayans question whether the embattled TPLF can govern a region, let alone a future state. Among Tigrayans, the yearning for peace far exceeds the willingness to fight another war.

The Eritrean government, although it commands a disciplined army, lacks the diplomatic support and military capabilities to confront a stronger adversary. Its economic base is fragile; its population is small, overburdened by years of forced conscription, and exhausted by endless mobilization. Eritrea’s international isolation—worsened by sanctions, strained relations with neighbors, and a dismal human rights record—undermines its capacity to secure foreign military or financial assistance. These constraints—weak economy, fragile population base, diplomatic isolation, and limited military resources—reduce Eritrea’s capacity to sustain a protracted war

The Ethiopian state faces even greater problems. Armed insurgencies continue in Amhara and Oromia, the country’s two most populous regions. Federal forces have failed to suppress either movement and have lost control over extensive territory. Across the country, support for the government has collapsed. A nationwide strike by healthcare workers—triggered by surging inflation—signals broader unrest. Legitimacy has eroded; institutions have decayed; crises have multiplied. The military—commanded by officers appointed for ethnic loyalty rather than professional competence, crippled by systemic corruption, and plagued by operational incapacity—is unfit for war. These deficiencies became evident when the army suffered a series of humiliating defeats in the last war against the TPLF.

External actors can influence both the likelihood and the outcome of a renewed conflict. In the previous war, the United States played a moderating role, driven by its own strategic interests in Ethiopia, the Horn, and the Red Sea. The Biden administration helped contain escalation by the Ethiopian government and dissuaded the TPLF from

pursuing independence. It appointed Special Envoy Mike Hammer, whose diplomacy helped secure the Pretoria Agreement. Under President Trump, U.S. policy shifted toward disengagement. That shift may have persuaded the Ethiopian government that war carries no consequences and emboldened the TPLF to pursue secession.

Regional powers also have the capacity to influence whether the war erupts and how it unfolds. Egypt, a traditional adversary of Ethiopia and locked in dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, has aligned with Eritrea and had supported the TPLF in the past. Saudi Arabia continues to back the Eritrean regime. The United Arab Emirates has supplied Ethiopia with drones and weapons. Turkey has armed Ethiopia with drones as well, but backs Somalia over Abiy's memorandum of understanding with Somaliland, the breakaway state of Somalia, later cancelled. Whether another war erupts will depend in part on how these regional powers calculate their interests and the extent to which they are willing to intervene to secure them.

Under present conditions, neither side appears capable of waging war. The TPLF—isolated abroad, fractured within, stripped of territory, crippled by corruption, and bereft of popular support—lacks the means to mount a new campaign. The federal government, weakened by internal fragmentation, collapsing legitimacy, and mounting public dissent, cannot sustain another conflict. Rhetoric has escalated, but capacity has not. The Eritrean government commands a well-trained army but lacks the diplomatic support, economic strength, and military capacity to fight a stronger adversary. Its international isolation, small population, and limited resources leave it vulnerable. Eritreans may defend sovereignty but show little enthusiasm for another costly war.

Eritrea's shifting loyalties, Abiy Ahmed's expansionist ambitions, the Tigrayan elite's secessionist agenda, the TPLF's record of miscalculation, and foreign interference have created a volatile situation. Any of these variables could reignite the conflict, dismantle either state, and destabilize the entire region. Even in the absence of strategic advantage, wars can erupt because of misjudgments, personal ambition, or elite rivalries. Peace in the Horn is no local concern; it is a global imperative essential to regional order, international security, and the prevention of another humanitarian catastrophe.

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