

RELIGION AND CONFLICT IN DIRE DAWA:

INTERCOMMUNAL TENSIONS
AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEACE

Kedir Jamal



Rift Valley Institute
MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK



**Peace
Research
Facility**

RELIGION AND CONFLICT IN DIRE DAWA:

INTERCOMMUNAL TENSIONS
AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEACE

Kedir Jemal



Rift Valley Institute
MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK



**Peace
Research
Facility**

RELIGION AND CONFLICT IN DIRE DAWA: INTERCOMMUNAL TENSIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEACE

THE ETHIOPIA PEACE RESEARCH FACILITY

This report was written for the Ethiopia Peace Research Facility (PRF). The PRF is an independent facility combining timely analysis on peace and conflict from Ethiopian experts with support for conflict sensitive programming in the country. It is managed by the Rift Valley Institute and funded by the UK government.

THE AUTHOR

Kedir Jemal (PhD) is an assistant professor in agro-economics currently working at Haramaya University. He has more than 14 years of experience in academia and research in Ethiopia and Somaliland. He has managed and participated in several projects, among them being, 'The direct values of pastoralism in Somali Regional State' funded by USAID. He has also worked on a project entitled 'Inter-communal tensions, violence and conflicts in the time of a pandemic in Ethiopia' funded by the European Institute of Peace (EIP).

THE RIFT VALLEY INSTITUTE

The Rift Valley Institute works in Eastern and Central Africa to bring local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development. Copyright © Rift Valley Institute 2023. This work is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercialNoDerivatives License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

COVER DESIGN: Designed by Maggie Dougherty.

CONTENTS

Abbreviations	5
----------------------	----------

Map	6
------------	----------

Summary	7
----------------	----------

Introduction	8
---------------------	----------

Socio-economic context	9
Demography	9
Economic context	10
Religion, ethnicity and communal peace	11

Inter-communal conflicts and tension	17
Overview	17
Religion and ethnic conflict in Dire Dawa	18
Religious tensions and disputes	21
Contextual factors and political manipulation	23

Religions and peacebuilding	26
Religious leaders	26
Religious organizations in Dire Dawa	27
Dire Dawa administration	28
Personal inter-religious relations, hopes and concerns	29

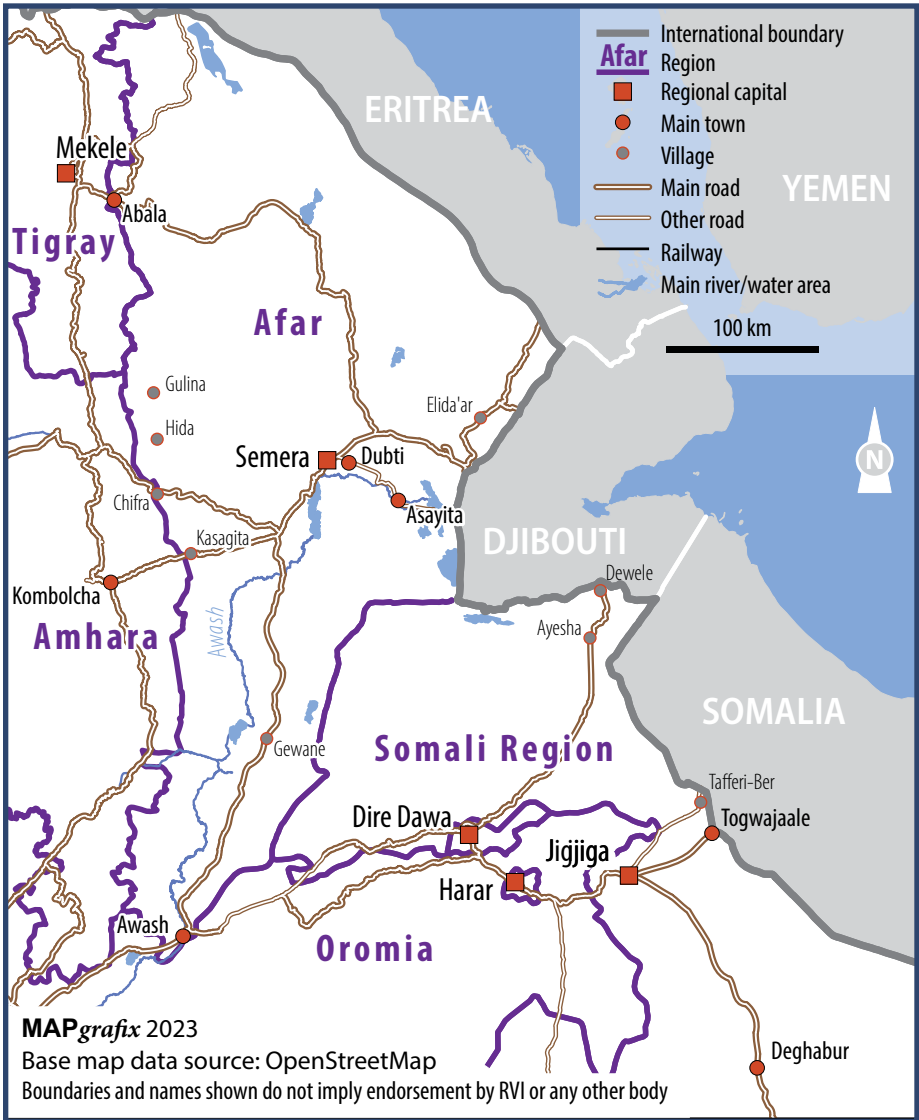
Conclusions	31
--------------------	-----------

References	33
-------------------	-----------

ABBREVIATIONS

EPRDF	Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front
IRC	Inter-Religious Council
PP	Prosperity Party
SPDP	Somali People’s Democratic Party
TPLF	Tigray People’s Liberation Front

MAP



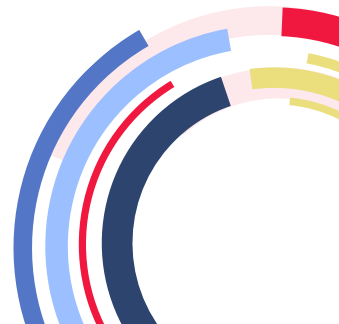
SUMMARY

- Dire Dawa, Ethiopia's second largest city, is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious economic hub in the country's eastern region, sitting on the contested boundary between the Oromia and Somali regions. Despite an overarching sense that the city's historical norm is one of inter-religious and inter-ethnic conviviality, Dire Dawa has since 2018 been afflicted by successive waves of inter-communal violence.
- While the initial round of conflicts in the city could be read as purely ethnic clashes, external and internal factors have since drawn religious identity into the fray. Inter-religious clashes elsewhere and the perception of rising religious tension among the youth have contributed to expectations of inter-religious conflict.
- Even so, the predominant factor underlying the conflicts seems to be a local one. When the central ethnic controversy evolved from an intra-Muslim (Oromo vs. Somali) rivalry into a Christian-Muslim one (Amhara vs. Oromo/Somali), it acquired a religious dimension. Given the territorial nature of these disputes, it is unsurprising that Orthodox *Təmqāt* processions through predominantly Muslim areas became the major flashpoint.
- Despite a generalized perception of rising inter-religious conflict and extremism, there is little evidence of this in Dire Dawa itself, with not a single participant denying the right of any religion to exist and flourish in the city. Moreover, there is a widespread view that the recent clashes have not fundamentally altered the prospects of inter-religious peace.
- This leaves considerable room for peacebuilding work. Religious actors have an important role to play in calming inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions, despite some criticism of religious leaders becoming politically co-opted or working for their own benefit. More institutionalized forms of inter-religious dialogue, such as the Inter-Religious Council, also hold the potential to build peace across communities, although the council itself has now become a site of contestation, with the Muslim side pushing for greater representation.
- Overall, the politics of ethnicity and religion are subject to a range of contextual factors, including economic pressures, youth unemployment, competition over land, and ethnic and religious homogenization of suburban settlements. This provides significant scope for administrative intervention beyond direct dialogue and peacebuilding. Creating more economic opportunities, setting up transparent processes for land allocation, and developing zoning plans that promote ethnic and religious pluralization in each of the city's suburbs would go a long way in preventing further conflict.

INTRODUCTION

This report explores the perceptions of and factors underlying recent ethnic and religious clashes in the city of Dire Dawa. It draws on background research, as well as fieldwork conducted in Dire Dawa in October 2022, involving in-depth interviews with 27 individuals. In selecting the study participants, a broad range of interlocutors across all religions, young and old, lay and religious leaders were selected. While a qualitative study on this scale cannot claim to representatively depict the entire field, this approach has provided a number of insights into the main debates and differing perceptions at play. This will provide a nuanced assessment of the conflict drivers in Dire Dawa, both in terms of causative factors and popular perceptions.

Section 1 of the report provides an overview of the socio-economic context, highlighting several of the root causes behind the rising tensions, including economic challenges and homogenizing religious and ethnic settlement patterns. Section 2 then proceeds to describe the conflicts themselves, as well as participant perceptions regarding the interplay of religion and ethnicity, the role of religious sentiments in the conflicts, and the influence of politics. Following this, section 3 examines the resources available for religious peacebuilding efforts, before the conclusion draws together the main findings of the report.



SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

DEMOGRAPHY

Dire Dawa is the second largest city in Ethiopia. Established in 1894, its location in the low land made it a preferred location for the French company overseeing railway construction.¹ Initially, Dire Dawa city was dominated by foreign communities, mainly French, Italian, Arabs and Sudanese citizens.² The city's current demographic landscape has been shaped by the different nationalities present in Ethiopia. The current administrative region of Dire Dawa covers an area of 1,213 km² and hosts approximately half-a-million inhabitants, with the district's rural areas accounting for around 188,000 of these.

In 2004, Dire Dawa was declared a chartered city by FDRE proclamation No. 416/2004, making it directly accountable to the federal government and setting out the city's democratic and administrative structures.³ This move arose from unresolved claims by the Oromo and Somali, with both sides clashing repeatedly in the 1990s over territorial ownership of the city, making it impossible to integrate Dire Dawa into either Oromia or Somali Regional State. Accordingly, part of the 2004 conflict resolution package was an agreement to administer the city through ethnic quotas, using a 40:40:20 formula applied to the respective power-sharing ratios of Oromo, Somali and other ethnic groups. Over time, the political dominance of these two ethnic groups has created a sense of alienation among other ethnic groups, with the 40:40:20 formula remaining a hotly contested topic when it comes to the city's administration.⁴ An amendment to the city's charter regarding tax benefits is currently under review in the Ethiopian House of Representatives. This debate prompted heated discussion when a parliamentarian proposed a referendum on whether the city should be integrated into Somali Regional State or Oromia. This suggestion was swiftly and vehemently opposed by the city administration.⁵

-
- 1 Belew Worku, 'Historical-Sociology of Interaction in the city of Dawa—Dawa: The case of Oromo-Somali ethnic groups', *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications* 7/3 (March 2017).
 - 2 Dire Dawa City Administration, 'People: Socio-Cultural Context', <https://diredawa.gov.et/en/city/people>.
 - 3 Proclamation No. 416/2004, *Federal Negarit Gazeta of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*, 30 July 2004.
 - 4 UNHCR, 'Dire Dawa Information Brochure'. https://help.unhcr.org/kenya/wp-content/uploads/sites/29/2021/06/Dire-Dawa-City_Information-Brochure.pdf.
 - 5 'News: Dire Dawa City Admin refutes reports of referendum to decide on city's future', *Addis Standard*, 20 January 2023. Accessed 28 January 2023, <https://addisstandard.com/news-dire-dawa-city-admin-refutes-reports-of-referendum-to-decide-on-citys-future/>.

ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Dire Dawa is the economic hub of Eastern Ethiopia. Its geographical proximity to Ethiopia's borders and ports in Djibouti and Berbera in Somaliland make the city an ideal trading hub. The city is home to several major industries, and the Dire Dawa Free Trade Zone has recently been established to attract further domestic and foreign investment in trade and production.⁶ Trade is one of the most important economic activities, sustaining livelihoods in Dire Dawa and making the city the primary destination market for cash crops produced in Oromia and Somali Regional State. Khat and vegetables are mainly supplied from Oromia region, while fruit and livestock arrive from the rural areas of Dire Dawa and Somali Regional State. The city is also a transit point for internationally exported vegetables and khat to Djibouti. Accordingly, Dire Dawa contributes much to Ethiopia's economic development generally and the country's eastern corridor in particular. Due to its strategic trade location and business opportunities, the city attracts many migrants, resulting in the region having the highest positive migration rate (inflows-outflows) in the country—greater even than Addis Ababa or Harar.⁷ In addition, Dire Dawa's cultural diversity and its residents' welcoming behaviours are generally seen as positive attributes attracting migration into the city.⁸

Nonetheless, the city is affected by severe macroeconomic problems, including high cost of living and unemployment.⁹ As of 2021, Dire Dawa region's official unemployment rate stood at 15.9 per cent, second only to Addis Ababa. When limited to urban areas only, the unemployment figure rises to 20.8 per cent, which is close to the average of Ethiopia's major towns and regional capitals.¹⁰ This issue was noted by several participants, some of whom claim that the roots of the city's economic stagnation are political, going back to the previous Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government. One informant gave the example of a local cotton factory, which had 'employed more than 7,000 employees' until it was 'dismantled and taken to Tigray region by the TPLF [Tigray People's Liberation Front], laying-off all the factory employees'.¹¹ Another participant claimed that 'the TPLF became resource-centred

-
- 6 Metasebia Teshome, 'Ethiopia inaugurates first free trade zone in Dire Dawa', *Capital Ethiopia*, 14 August 2022. Accessed 24 January 2023, www.capitalethiopia.com/2022/08/14/ethiopia-inaugurates-first-free-trade-zone-in-dire-dawa/.
 - 7 Central Statistical Agency (CSA), 'Ethiopia 2021 Labour and Migration Survey: Key Findings', August 2021, 14. Accessed 24 January 2023, www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Final-2021-LABOUR-FORCE-AND-MIGRATION-SURVEY_Key-finding-Report-17AUG2021.pdf.
 - 8 Dereje Feyissa, Milkessa Midega and Ketema Wakjira, 'Expectations and belonging in Dire Dawa Drivers, dynamics and challenges of rural to urban mobility', Rift Valley Institute, February 2008. <https://riftvalley.net/publication/expectations-and-belonging-dire-dawa-o>.
 - 9 Interview with businessman, Muslim, male, age 49.
 - 10 CSA, '2021 Labour and Migration', 32.
 - 11 Interview with Somali intellectual, Muslim, male, age 35.

and created political and economic inequality everywhere'.¹² Beyond expressing criticism of the previous national government, such statements imply that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's reforms will be judged by their impact on the local economy.

RELIGION, ETHNICITY AND COMMUNAL PEACE

Dire Dawa is a Muslim-majority region, with Muslims accounting for 70.9 per cent of the population, followed by Orthodox Christians (25.6 per cent), Protestants (2.8 per cent), Catholics (0.4 per cent) and others (0.3 per cent). These figures change slightly, however, when adjusted for the urban context. While 99.5 per cent of the population is Muslim in rural areas, this falls to 57.4 per cent in the city itself, where Orthodoxy and Protestantism claim 37.4 per cent and 4.1 per cent respectively.¹³ The traditional religion of *Waaqeffanna* is practised by very few people in either the city or rural areas, with only 242 people identifying as 'traditional' in the 2007 census. The city, then, is marked by significantly higher religious plurality in terms of Christian–Muslim encounters than the surrounding countryside.

The same is true of ethnicity. The two dominant ethnic groups in the region's rural areas are the Oromo (73.5 per cent population share) and Somali (26 per cent), while other ethnicities play only a very marginal role. In urban Dire Dawa, however, the Oromo and Somali proportions account for 33.1 per cent and 23.5 per cent, respectively, with the Amhara leapfrogging into second place with 29.5 per cent.¹⁴ Territorial claims and inter-ethnic rivalries between Oromo and Somali turned the region into a contested area in the 1980s and 1990s. Serious conflict between the two groups resulted in the 40:40:20 power-sharing formula being adopted by the EPRDF and its affiliate, the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP). Under the system, the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation and the SPDP are each assigned 40 per cent of the city's political positions, with the remaining 20 per cent shared between other EPRDF parties.¹⁵ The office of mayor is rotated between the Oromo and Somali communities. While this division of political power has been characterized as providing a 'peaceful but competitive ground' in the town,¹⁶ our research indicates that tensions have been rising on both ethnic and religious grounds. This is in line with other reporting around the 2021 elections, which noted

12 Interview with businessman, Muslim, male, age 49.

13 Central Statistics Agency (CSA), 'The 2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia: Statistical Report for Dire Dawa Council', 2007, 29–32, <http://www.csa.gov.et/census-report/complete-report/census-2007?download=186:dire-dawa-statistical>.

14 CSA, 'The 2007 Population', 25–26. Other larger ethnic groups in the town were Gurage and Tigray in the 2007 census. These numbers will have changed significantly since this census. One would expect a much-reduced Tigray population given the events of recent years, but other shifts are likely as well.

15 Mistir Sew, 'Dire Dawa's Dilemma: Sharing Power in Ethiopia's Eastern Melting Pot', *Ethiopia Insight*, 2 August 2021. Accessed 26 January 2023, www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/08/02/dire-dawas-dilemma-sharing-power-in-ethiopias-eastern-melting-pot.

16 Belew, 'Historical-Sociology'.

how contentious the formula had become. With the transformation of the EPRDF into the Prosperity Party (PP), some expected the formula would be abandoned. The regionalization of the PP, however, has led to ethnic legacies persisting within the ruling party. The establishment of ethnic and religious parties outside the PP has further complicated the picture, with the two predominant Oromo parties boycotting the election and the main Somali party accusing the government of obstructing its candidates.¹⁷ In the end, the PP won all the council seats, which likely means the 40:40:20 formula will remain an unanswered question under the party.

In general, participants framed their assessments of inter-communal peace within a narrative of decline. Almost all informants painted an idealized picture of urban Dire Dawa as a highly mixed community through marriage and other social arrangements. Such diversity was presented as a long-standing tradition of this urban ‘Queen of the Desert’, creating strong communal ties and significant social capital. In the eyes of study participants, the city’s character and identity is bound up with being multicultural and multi-religious. Informants made comments along the lines of ‘the people of Dire Dawa are most integrated [and] ... have strong relationships through marriage and other social interactions’,¹⁸ or stated that ‘this community has many shared values that bind them together. It is a must to accept and live together, to tolerate each other’.¹⁹ When asked specifically about inter-religious encounters in day-to-day life, most reported good relations. For example, two Protestant participants described economic and social ties between Christian and Muslim families in the following terms:

I established good relationship with Muslim brothers. ... I remember one of them gave me 10,000 birr [following a property loss]. After some time, he died, and currently I follow up his children’s schooling issues until now.²⁰

I have a Muslim friend who I love, he respects my religion and I also do the same. He enjoys our festivals and we do his also. His family eat the Christian meat and we do the same in his home.²¹

Other informants went as far as highlighting the unique value of intermarriage, with a Muslim participant observing:

these people lived for long together, they mixed up. You cannot see this in other places. Or at least it is rare, that it is easy to marry from religion to another, like a Muslim being married to a Christian. The same is true with ethnicity [i.e. marriages between different

17 Mistir Sew, ‘Dire Dawa’s Dilemma’.

18 Interview with bank manager, Orthodox, male, age 34.

19 Interview with religious leader, Muslim, male, age 57.

20 Interview with businessman and evangelist, Protestant, male, age 50.

21 Interview with manager, Protestant, male, age 38.

ethnic groups] ethnic-wise. If you go away from the east [of Ethiopia], you do not find this.²²

A female Orthodox informant concurred, stating:

My husband is a Muslim, we lived together for seven years. We lived also in the Muslim dominated area called Kefira market place and our neighbour and our friends all are Muslim, we have good relationship.²³

On closer inspection, however, this ideal of inter-communal conviviality appeared more brittle, with demographic changes seen as the main driver of faltering relations. One particular point frequently raised in interviews was a change in settlement patterns, which has reinforced communal homogeneity through mutual reinforcement of ethnic and religious identity. Although followers of different religions can be found among all Dire Dawa city's ethnic groups, there is a tendency to associate ethnicity with a particular religion. For instance, the Amhara ethnic group is generally considered Christian, while the Hararghe Oromo and the Somali are seen as Muslim. This has informed the city's religious and ethnic composition. Only the old town, which was originally established by foreign communities, is inhabited by a wide variety of ethnic and religious communities. By contrast, the suburbs are gradually becoming very homogeneous, both in terms of ethnic and religion composition. Addis Ketema is dominated by the Amhara and is clearly Christian in character. Laga-Harre, in turn, is inhabited primarily by ethnic Oromos and predominantly Muslim, while Baburahma and Sheikh Habib are primarily Somali Muslim areas.

The geographic positions of these suburbs has also influenced conflict patterns. Situated between Addis Ketema and Baburahma/Sheikh Habib, Laga-Harra has been the site of ethnic clashes between Amhara and Somali groups. Baburahma and Sheikh Habib, in turn, have been areas of Muslim-Christian conflict. In both these latter suburbs, the Orthodox churches are located in Somali and Oromo areas, meaning their respective *tabots*²⁴ have to travel a considerable distance through Muslim quarters on their way to Addis Ketema, where the annual *Təmqāt* processions meet.

The newest areas of Dire Dawa city are also characterized by homogeneous settlement patterns determined by ethnicity and migration. A Muslim participant explained how religious and ethnic concentration became the norm in the city:

22 Interview with unemployed resident, Muslim, male, age 41.

23 Interview with housewife, Orthodox, female, age 25.

24 A *tabot* is a sanctified altar tablet, which is dedicated to a patron saint or divine figure and consecrates a church. As such, they are the most sacred object of each church, carefully shielded from view and carried by priests only. This is done in reference to Old Testament processions because each *tabot* is seen as replica of the Mosaic tablets of law, representing the Ark of the Covenant, which according to Ethiopian legend is held by the Church in Axum.

We grew up differently from the current situation. I now live in Jerba Sefer where Muslims dominate. I chose the area because of cheap housing rent and no other criteria. But most people chose this place because they are Muslim. ... The bad thing is that it does not even stop there. The people from Awaday [in East Haraghe, Oromia region] prefer Genda Awaday. The Gurage prefer the Gurage area, etc. I think this is not good. Previously people mixed up and lived anywhere they liked.²⁵

As these comments indicate, the discussion about ethnic and religious settlement patterns is a nuanced one. While Oromo, Amhara and Somali groups are clearly predominant in certain areas, smaller, more specific ethnic identities also play a role in determining where people settle, even if that group does not attain a majority in any particular quarter. Religion can sometimes play into how exactly these smaller ethnic groups position themselves in relation to the larger ones.

Of course, many residents do not fit generalized alignments between ethnic and religious identity. For example, Dire Dawa has Amhara Muslims, who either originate from the multi-religious Wollo region or converted to Islam. Similarly, there are many Christian Oromo who migrated from the Western parts of Oromiya, such as Wellega or Shewa. One such person told us how, during an outbreak of inter-ethnic violence, a family member was attacked by fellow Oromo due to her religion and choice of settlement: 'People have a misunderstanding: if you are Christian they consider you as an Amhara, and Amhara means Christian'.²⁶ Such stereotypes can make life difficult for people who do not fit in, either because they are from a smaller ethnic group or they do not adhere to the dominant settlement pattern.

Increasing ethnic and religious homogenization was seen by some participants as both a short-term solution for current conflicts and tensions, and a long-term negative outcome when it comes to inter-community relationships. One Christian informant lamented how ethnic and religious separation had fuelled conflict:

Previously we grew up eating Muslim meat while they do the same [with our meat]. But now all this has changed. ... Every ethnic group has its own social organization [*idir*], where they help one another through good and bad, but previously you would see every ethnic group join [one *idir*] and people had a good relationship. Some years ago we learned the Qur'an inside the mosque but now we want to burn it. Now we are asking is this Muslim meat or Christian meat? We did not ask this question when we were in elementary school. In the previous time, if there was a conflict between religions, the leaders solved the problem themselves. But now the solution is attack.²⁷

Others reversed the causality, blaming conflict for increasing religious and ethnic separation.

25 Interview with Somali intellectual, Muslim, male, age 35.

26 Interview with driver, Orthodox, male, age 23.

27 Interviews with civil servant, Orthodox, male, age 32; businessman, Muslim, male, age 49.

One Orthodox informant asserted that communal violence had made him think more about his religious and ethnic identity, noting that he knew many who had changed their residency within the city as a result.²⁸ Another informant recounted how inter-religious relations had deteriorated in the city, in part due to religious conflict in other parts of the country, including Mota and Gondar.²⁹

This general narrative of previously peaceful but now deteriorating inter-religious relations was often accompanied by a sentiment of politics ruining religion's capacity for peace. As one participant summarized it: 'Nowadays religion is abused by politics. The tie religion has with ethnic [politics] also complicated the conflicts'.³⁰ Many informants argued that both ethnicity and religion were used as tools by politicians to divide the people and extract profits. Blame for this was attributed variously by participants. Quite a few faulted the TPLF and the EPRDF coalition it led for employing religious and ethnic diversity in a divide-and-rule strategy. Others believed that the speed of reform under Abiy and the still unsolved political issues had provoked a turn to religious and ethnic particularities, or faulted his government for not doing enough to prevent inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflict.

Even the rise of Pentecostal Protestantism, which has come largely at the expense of the Orthodox Church, can be seen as more than a demographic development. One informant claimed that the Charismatic renewal movement in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church was intended to weaken the church, asserting:

Nowadays the West is investing a lot to destroy the original religion of Orthodoxy. They want us [to become] a copy of them and finally they destroy our original religion. You will see in the future they will dominate the city and the country.³¹

Concomitantly, given that politics is seen as exacerbating these religious conflicts, many participants thought solutions should be sought from better political practices and governance. Some pointed to recent instances where security forces had prevented or quickly suppressed violence, while others praised current mayor Kedir Juhar for working closely with religious leaders to keep peace in the city.³² Only three informants offered views on the desirability of political secularism, mentioning that this was a governing principle in Ethiopia and bemoaning

28 Interviews with resident of unspecified vocation, Orthodox, male, age 23; businessman, Muslim, male, age 49.

29 Interview with Prosperity Party politician, Muslim, female, age 35.

30 Interview with young *ustaz*, Muslim, male, age 30.

31 Interviews with civil servant, Orthodox, male, age 32; businessman, Muslim, male, age 49.

32 Interviews with pastor, Protestant, male, age 40; religious leader, Orthodox, male, age 67; religious leader, Catholic, male, age 23; resident of unspecified vocation, Muslim, male, age 45. It is worth noting that these four informants come from all the major religious groups in town: Islam, Orthodoxy, Protestantism and Catholicism.

continued state interference in matters of religion.³³ One went on to call for a stricter implementation of secularism, arguing that both political and religious leaders were corrupt.

Youth tend to be the main actors in Dire Dawa's major conflicts. From the *Dimšačin Yäsäma* Muslim movement, which paved the way for the Queeroo Oromo political youth moment led by Jawar Mohammed, to other ethnic protests against the former regime, as well as in religious and inter-ethnic conflicts that have occurred since the transition to the current government, youths have played an active upfront role. This reflects the growing number of youths in the city, who now account for 35 per cent of the total population.³⁴ This increase is partly down to migration, as indicated in the Central Statistical Agency's 2007 report.³⁵ The majority of youths are unemployed, a problem many informants were acutely aware of. One respondent even surmised that the previous administration had systematically excluded youths from economic opportunities.³⁶ Others simply noted that the government was not paying enough attention to the challenges faced by the youth. In most recent movements that have emerged in Ethiopia, youth participation has been prominent. Likewise, previous literature has shown that when government systems marginalize youth, they become threats to security and national stability through engaging in violent conflict.³⁷

33 Interviews with university lecturer, Muslim, male, age 42; religious leader, Muslim, male, age 57; Somali intellectual, Muslim, male, age 35.

34 'Dire Dawa, Ethiopia — statistics', ZhujiWorld.com. <https://zhujiworld.com/et/208101-dire-dawa-region/>.

35 CSA, 'The 2007 Population'.

36 Interview with student, Muslim, male, age 23. Two other informants noted that there the previous government used unemployed youth to sow inter-communal conflict as part of their divide-and-rule strategy: religious leader, Muslim, male, age 34; religious leader, Catholic, male, age 23.

37 Alpaslan Özerdem, 'The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities', Oxford Research Group, 2016. [https://gdc.unicef.org/resource/role-youth-peacebuilding-challenges-and-opportunities#:~:text=BLOG/OPINION-,The%20Role%20of%20Youth%20in%20Peacebuilding%3A%20Challenges%20and%20Opportunities,ALPASLAN%20OZERDEM,-SOURCE%](https://gdc.unicef.org/resource/role-youth-peacebuilding-challenges-and-opportunities#:~:text=BLOG/OPINION-,The%20Role%20of%20Youth%20in%20Peacebuilding%3A%20Challenges%20and%20Opportunities,ALPASLAN%20OZERDEM,-SOURCE%20).

INTER-COMMUNAL CONFLICTS AND TENSION

OVERVIEW

In recent years, Dire Dawa has been hit with successive waves of ethnic and religious conflict. Even prior to the transition to the Abiy government, the city was no stranger to protests. The Islamic movement of ‘Let our voices be heard’ (*Dimšačīn Yäsāma*) was the first to assert the rights of Muslims across the country, including in Dire Dawa. This was followed by the Oromo protests and various other youth struggles against the EPRDF government.³⁸ During the transition period from the EPRDF government to Abiy’s administration in 2018, however, anti-government protests gave way to violent inter-ethnic conflicts between Oromo and Somali. This violence was a reflection of the conflict between the two groups across the long border they share. These increasing cross-border attacks between Oromo and Somali communities led to the displacement of more than a half-a-million people from both sides.³⁹ In part, these clashes were driven by political conflict between Abiy’s new administration and the then president of Somali Regional State, Abdi Iley, marked by an outbreak of violence in Jijiga. Abdi Iley resigned in August 2018 and was subsequently arrested under charges of ‘inciting violence leading to mass displacement’.⁴⁰ As a result of these regional conflicts, many internally displaced people fled to Dire Dawa, increasing the pressure there. Tensions erupted in violent clashes in August 2018, which according to International Crisis Group ‘left at least nine people dead, including six Djiboutian citizens; some 2,700 Djiboutians evacuated to Djibouti’.⁴¹ Further ethnic clashes continued to plague the city over the following months, with reports spanning November 2018 to November 2019 indicating that at least four people were killed, several injured and multiple

-
- 38 Tobias Hagmann and Mustafe Mohamed Abdi, ‘Inter-ethnic violence in Ethiopia’s Somali Regional State, 2017–2018’, LSE Conflict Research Programme Research Memo, March 2020. www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/Conflict-Research-Programme/crp-memos/Inter-ethnic-conflicts-SRS-Final-April-2020.pdf.
- 39 Hagmann and Abdi, ‘Inter-ethnic violence’.
- 40 Abdur Rahman Alfa Shaban, ‘Ethiopia’s Somali regional politics: new leader, Abdi Illey charged, Liyu police’, *Africanews*, 30 August 2018. www.africanews.com/2018/08/30/ethiopias-somali-regional-politics-new-leader-abdi-illey-charged-liyu-police/.
- 41 International Crisis Group, ‘CrisisWatch: Ethiopia’, August 2018. www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/august-2018; see also Abdur Rahman Alfa Shaban, ‘Djibouti airlifts citizens from Dire Dawa, affirms ties with Ethiopia’, *Africanews*, 8 August 2018. www.africanews.com/2018/08/08/djibouti-airlifts-citizens-from-dire-dawa-affirms-ties-with-ethiopia/#:~:text=The%20security%20crisis%20in%20Dire%20Dawa%20escalated%20as%20part%20of%20a%20federal%20and%20regional%20government%20clash%20in%20the%20Somali%20regional%20state.

houses burned.⁴²

Gradually, the conflicts took on a religious dimension. In January 2019, Orthodox *Ṭəmḻät* processions were disrupted by scuffles and rock-throwing youths, leading to severe clashes and large demonstrations lasting several days. One child was killed and around a dozen people injured, while over 300 individuals were arrested.⁴³ The following year, a *Ṭəmḻät* procession from Abuna Gregorios Church, located in a predominantly Muslim area, again sparked violence, leaving one person dead, at least seven wounded, two vehicles and a private residence torched, and three shops looted and burned.⁴⁴ A similar attack occurred in the neighbouring town of Harar on the same day. In both cases, ethnic identities played a role, with Muslim Oromo attacking *Ṭəmḻät* processions as expressions of Amhara and Ethiopian nationalism.⁴⁵ In other places in Dire Dawa, it was Somali youths attacking the procession. Further clashes around subsequent *Ṭəmḻät* were prevented, but the April 2022 attacks on Muslims in Gondar prompted a large demonstration in Dire Dawa that turned violent, with attacks on the police. Return fire killed a child. In addition, 22 police officers were injured, banks and government vehicles were damaged, and 89 people were taken into custody.⁴⁶

RELIGION AND ETHNIC CONFLICT IN DIRE DAWA

As is clear from the timeline above, violence in Dire Dawa took a religious turn the more the ethnic clashes moved away from a predominantly Oromo–Somali conflict, becoming instead Amhara–Oromo and Amhara–Somali conflicts. The long-standing conflict between Oromo and Somali tended to flare up during times of transition, and in Dire Dawa led to disputes about

-
- 42 ‘ደሬዳ እና ችግሮቿ [Dreda and her problems]’, VOA, 30 November 2018. <https://amharic.voanews.com/a/dire-dawa-conflict-4681772.html>; ‘At Least Two People Dead in Ethnic Clashes in Dire Dawa City’, *Hiiraan Online*, 20 November 2019. www.hiiraan.com/news/4/2019/Nov/166190/at_least_two_people_dead_in_ethnic_clashes_in_dire_dawa_city.aspx; see also ‘Dire Dawa seeks harmony as ethnic tensions run high’, *Ethiopia Observer*, 13 April 2019. www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2019/04/13/dire-dawa-seeks-harmony-as-ethnic-tensions-run-high/.
- 43 ‘Dire Dawa seeks harmony’, *Ethiopia Observer*; ‘News: Fourth day protests leave one dead, many injured in Dire Dawa city’, *Addis Standard*, 25 January 2019. <https://addisstandard.com/news-fourth-day-protests-leave-one-dead-many-injured-in-dire-dawa-city>; <https://borkena.com/2019/01/29/dire-dawa-police-arrested-308-suspects>.
- 44 ‘One man killed in Dire Dawa, seven wounded during Timkat’, *Borkena*, 21 January 2020. <https://borkena.com/2020/01/21/ethiopia-one-man-killed-in-dire-dawa-seven-wounded-during-timkat/>; ‘One Person Killed, Seven Wounded During Gunfire in Dire Dawa City’, *Ezega News*, 22 January 2020. www.ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/7675/One-Person-Killed-Seven-Wounded-During-Gunfire-in-Dire-Dawa-City.
- 45 ‘One man killed in Dire Dawa’, *Borkena*; ‘At Least 10 People Dead in Gondar During Epiphany Celebrations’, *Ezega News*, 20 January 2020. www.ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/7667/At-Least-10-People-Dead-in-Gondar-During-Epiphany-Celebrations.
- 46 ACLED, ‘Ethiopia Peace Observatory Weekly: 23 April–6 May 2022’, 12 May 2022. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-peace-observatory-weekly-23-april-6-may-2022-enam>.

political ownership of the city, with both sides encouraging their people to migrate to the city.⁴⁷ This Oromo–Somali conflict challenged Muslim unity in Dire Dawa and, according to some informants, religion played an instrumental role in peacebuilding processes among the parties involved in violent conflict.⁴⁸

The causes of conflict between the Amhara and the Oromo and Somali are deep-rooted, with the historical dominance of the former in the Ethiopian political arena provoking feelings of oppression in Oromo, Somali and other ethnic groups.

The demise of Tigrayan control over the Ethiopian state and economy following the end of the EPRDF regime has brought some of these discourses back to the fore. A flashpoint in Dire Dawa is the 40:40:20 administrative quota system, originally established as a peace formula in the Oromo–Somali contest, but now increasingly challenged by the Amhara and other ethnic groups. They claim they are not adequately represented under the system, while the Oromo and Somali tend to regard these criticisms as an attempt to restore Amhara dominance. Given the Amhara are predominantly Christian, this political debate about ethnicity, the Ethiopian nation state and local administration has taken on a religious dimension, with Christian *Ṭəmqāt* processions through Muslim and Somali/Oromo quarters providing tangible opportunities to settle political scores.

This complex entanglement of ethnicity and religion came up in numerous interviews. For some, ethnic tensions were the real underlying cause of conflict. For example, several Orthodox informants described those who attacked their *Ṭəmqāt* processions as ‘Somali’ rather than Muslims.⁴⁹ One used the term ‘Muslim’ only when describing peace overtures by the other side, clearly seeking to distinguish ethnicity as a conflict driver from religion as a peacebuilding factor.⁵⁰ On the Muslim side, ethnic explanations for the conflict rested on accusations of Amhara insensitivity. One informant recounted that Amhara youth in a *Ṭəmqāt* procession had been wearing t-shirts with Emperor Menelik on them, seeking to provoke Somali areas with this emblem of historic Amhara dominance.⁵¹ Another invoked a particular contemporary political discourse that addresses Amhara as ‘settlers’ (*neftegna*), claiming it is in their nature to oppress others. Hence, he asserted, the Amhara turned the local Somali into migrants and continue to look down on the Oromo. Moreover, the Amhara’s challenging of the 40:40:20 settlement demonstrated a continued unwillingness to recognize the importance of local ethnic majorities.⁵²

47 Dereje et al., ‘Expectations and belonging’.

48 Interviews with young *ustaz*, Muslim, male, age 30; student, Muslim, male, age 28.

49 Interviews with religious leader, Orthodox, male, age 67; driver, Orthodox, male, age 23; housewife, Orthodox, female, age 25.

50 Interview with driver, Orthodox, male, age 23.

51 Interview with university lecturer, Muslim, male, age 42.

52 Interview with unemployed resident, Muslim, male, age 41.

Even one of the Orthodox participants seemed to acknowledge the historical weight of Amhara predominance, noting how the national flag was seen locally seen as an Orthodox symbol.⁵³

The majority of participants, however, sought to make room for both religion and ethnicity in their description of conflict. Some chose a chronological solution for this, noting how previously ethnic conflicts were now morphing into religious ones. The most obvious reason for this was a crucial change within the ethnic conflict itself. One Muslim informant described the earlier conflicts as running between ‘Muslim Oromo’ and ‘Muslim Somali’, thereby fracturing Islamic unity. Once Amhara–Oromo tensions emerged, however, the conflict ‘changed its form from ethnic to religious’.⁵⁴ This illustrates the often double-sided character of inter-communal conflicts in Ethiopia, which usually have both an ethnic and religious side. Where tensions emerge between two ethnic groups of different primary religious affiliations, a conflict can easily acquire a religious dimension or be framed chiefly in religious terms. Another Muslim informant offered similar reasoning, adding a change in settlement patterns to his observations: in some instances, a suburb became predominantly Muslim Oromo, but the Orthodox church building remained.⁵⁵

Others tended to oscillate between ethnic and religious categories, sometimes leading to outright contradictions. A Protestant informant insisted that one must strictly separate ethnic conflict from religion, but then when recounting the *Təmqät* conflicts described how the procession passed through a ‘Muslim area, especially the Somali community’.⁵⁶ Similarly, a Muslim informant claimed the recent conflicts were clearly ethnic, as if they had had a religious dimension, they would have been impossible to contain. Yet he also asserted that ‘Amharas have a great problem with Muslims because of what they did to their Muslim brothers’⁵⁷—most likely an allusion to the 2019 attack on Muslims in the Amhara town of Mota, which saw four mosques attacked and scores of Muslim businesses looted and burned. Such failed attempts to isolate ethnicity from religion only illustrate the extent to which participants wrestled to integrate the more recent attacks on religious processions into their understanding of conflict in Dire Dawa. An Orthodox participant even acknowledged this outright, telling us that the conflicts have made people consider both their religious and ethnic identity, as they worry about which group they belong to or how their identity might be read.⁵⁸

53 Interview with university lecturer, Orthodox, male, age 55.

54 Interview with student, Muslim, male, age 28.

55 Interview with businessman, Muslim, age 49.

56 Interview with pastor, Protestant, male, age 45.

57 Interview with resident of unspecified vocation, Muslim, male, age 45.

58 Interview with resident of unspecified vocation, Orthodox, male, age 23.

RELIGIOUS TENSIONS AND DISPUTES

In addition to reflecting on the role of ethnicity in the conflicts, many participants gave specific inter- and intra-religious reasons for why they erupted. Among the inter-religious factors, Christian–Muslim clashes elsewhere were prominent. Some interlocutors brought up the attacks on their compatriots in Mota and Gondar, noting that these had spillover effects for inter-religious relations in Dire Dawa. Both Protestant and Muslim participants argued that the attacks on Orthodox processions in Dire Dawa were possibly retaliation for what happened in Mota and Gondar, fuelled by social media accounts.⁵⁹ Some Muslim informants, however, were careful about drawing such conclusions, emphasizing instead how they had preached and practised restraint in order to prevent retaliatory attacks in Dire Dawa. One claimed that if Muslims had chosen to retaliate, ‘it would not have taken us one hour to burn all the churches from Dire Dawa to Chiro’. Both he and another Muslim informant emphasized how they had worked with youths to cool sentiments.⁶⁰ What emerged was a sense of long-suffering Muslim victimhood, with one Muslim informant claiming that Orthodox Christians have a deep-rooted hatred for Muslims and Protestants, and another citing attacks on the prophet by Christians and atheists worldwide as provoking the desire to take revenge, which must be resisted.⁶¹ Regardless of an individual’s opinion, it was clear from the interviews that events elsewhere in the country were being closely observed locally, likely prompting security concerns.

Another inter-religious source of tension is competition over public space. As already mentioned, conflict erupted in particular where *Ṭəmḻät* processions passed through Muslim areas, with several informants mentioning regular clashes flaring on the route from St Egziabher Ab Church, which is surrounded by Somali territory. Another church mentioned by participants was Tsadiqu Abune Gregorios Church on the outskirts of a Muslim Oromo area in south-western Dire Dawa city. Locals had claimed the land on which the church was to be built ‘is ours’, and attempted to prevent its construction.⁶² These claims were not substantiated and the building went ahead, resulting in frequent conflicts along the way to the church, including during a *Ṭəmḻät* procession. There was also a sense of spatial infringement in reports of Protestants handing out leaflets near a mosque, which was presented as a case of religious extremism.⁶³

Christian–Muslim tensions were not the only form of religious conflict referred to in interviews. Intra-Christian divergence, including the rise of Protestantism and its impact on Orthodoxy, also concerned some interlocutors. As already mentioned, one informant saw a global conspiracy

59 Interviews with pastor, Protestant, male, age 45; businessman, Protestant, male, age 50; Prosperity Party politician, Muslim, female, age 35.

60 Interviews with religious leader, Muslim, male, age 34; resident of unspecified vocation, Muslim, male, age 45.

61 Interview with religious leader, Muslim, male, age 34.

62 Interview with religious leader, Orthodox, male, age 67.

63 Interview with university lecturer, Muslim, male, age 42.

behind this, stating that ‘nowadays the Western [countries] are investing a lot to destroy the original religion of Orthodox’.⁶⁴ This comment was made in the context of his concerns about different variations within Orthodoxy, including the Tehadiso renewal movement, which was also brought up as a now ousted movement by another Orthodox informant.⁶⁵

Others reported that the ‘modernized’ Orthodox movements had become ‘a challenge to the regional religion’, seemingly hinting at neo-traditionalist positions that seek to roll back regional divergence.⁶⁶ One participant was more specific, noting a recent dispute ‘over preaching using another language, but some said to only use Ge’ez’.⁶⁷ The informant came out for the use of local languages in what was perhaps the clearest indication in the fieldwork of an already brewing conflict that would erupt months later with the brief secession of some Oromo bishops.

Muslims also reported internal divisions, with one informant attributing this to the previous government’s introduction of Al-Ahbash Islam ‘as an instrument to intervene in religious affairs’.⁶⁸ The participant noted that this is what had sparked the now commonplace division between Sufi and Salafi Islam in the town: ‘Before Al-Ahbash there was no problem among Muslim we did not call “*Sufiya*” and “*Sellafi*”’. This division was also brought up by another informant, who linked it to conflicts over celebrations of the prophet’s birth and prayer styles in mosques.⁶⁹ A far more prevalent issue in reports on intra-Muslim divisions, however, related to the local Islamic Affairs Supreme Council. The council had adopted a policy akin to the 40:40:20 rule regarding the ethnic make-up of its membership, with four of its ten members Somali, four Oromo, and the remaining two from other ethnic groups. Some have contested this distribution, asserting that the selection of council members should instead be based on religious knowledge and piety.⁷⁰

Similar to those from the other major religions, Protestants noted growing tensions in their midst due to different groups and political divisions.⁷¹ It is important to note that, across the board, Orthodox, Muslim and Protestant participants did not directly link their internal differences with the clashes seen in Dire Dawa. Nonetheless, these intra-religious disputes contributed to a sense of the declining ability of religions and religious leaders to bring unity and peace.

64 Interview with civil servant, Orthodox, male, age 32.

65 Interview with housewife, Orthodox, female, age 25.

66 Interview with resident of unspecified vocation, Orthodox, male, age 23.

67 Interview with bank manager, Orthodox, male, age 34.

68 Interview with religious leader, Muslim, male, age 57.

69 Interview with student, Muslim, male, age 28.

70 Interviews with student, Muslim, male, age 28; young *ustaz*, Muslim, age 30.

71 Interviews with pastor, Protestant, male, age 45; businessman, Protestant, male, age 50; manager, Protestant, male, age 38.



CONTEXTUAL FACTORS AND POLITICAL MANIPULATION

Beyond the role of ethnicity and religious division, many participants named contextual and political factors as key causes of inter-communal conflict in Dire Dawa. Aside from the already discussed issues of contested land rights and homogenizing settlement patterns, the most important contextual factor was age, with most participants offering reflections on the role of Dire Dawa's youth in driving the conflicts. Some pointed to unemployment as a major underlying cause, with one informant claiming 'unemployed youth can be driven by a small reward'.⁷² One young informant concurred, explaining that the youth was actively discriminated against by the previous administration and that current efforts to aid the young via collectivization and microcredits were insufficient.⁷³ In addition, several informants listed what they perceived to be flaws among the Dire Dawa youth—above all substance abuse. Khat and shisha smoking are generally accepted in Dire Dawa for those engaged in labour, as it is believed these stimulants provide strength and endurance for work. When it comes to unemployed youths, however, drug use is generally seen as a sign of unproductive dependence on family and friends, as well as a driver of crime and violence. One respondent summarized this perspective as follows:

In this city there are a lot of unemployed youths everywhere. Most of them are addicted to khat and hashish. They are in the addiction cave. They fight each other by grouping themselves as Somali against Oromo [or] as Oroma and Amhara.⁷⁴

Moreover, some informants saw the youth as beset by emotionalism and short tempers, regarding them as primary drivers behind the rise in extremism. This perception is rooted in the ethnically aligned youth movements operating in the city, which are generally seen as serving particular political interests. The Somali youth movement, known as '*Heego*', was used by former Somali Regional State president Abdi Iley in his attempts to retain power. Similarly, the *Qeerroo* – an Oromo youth movement operational throughout Ethiopia – was led by Jawar Mohammed, who for a while was a major opposition figure. Finally, the *Satenaw* group is a local youth movement composed of other ethnic groups, and has struggled against the 40:40:20 quota with the primary goal of bringing political change to the city. Overall, our informants saw the youth as easily manipulated by political interest groups. Accordingly, many participants noted that their peacebuilding efforts are mainly directed at youth.⁷⁵ Both young and old interviewees claimed these efforts were broadly successful, although there were also hints at the challenges

72 Interview with pastor, Protestant, male, age 45; similarly: interview with religious leader, Muslim, male, age 34.

73 Interview with student, Muslim, male, age 23.

74 Religious leader, Muslim, male, age 34.

75 Interviews with pastor, Protestant, male, age 45; student, Muslim, male, age 28; pastor, Protestant, male, age 40; religious leader, Orthodox, male, age 67; religious leader, Muslim, male, age 34; religious leader, Catholic, male, age 23; housewife, Orthodox, female, age 25; resident of unspecified vocation, Muslim, male, age 45; religious leader, Muslim, male, age 57; religious leader, Muslim, male, age unstated; young *ustaz*, Muslim, age 30.

involved. One young student conveyed his scepticism that such educational efforts would be sufficient while the structural challenges facing the youth went unresolved.⁷⁶ Moreover, a Pentecostal leader observed:

The youth say: do not come to us. That is because of their anger, you have to accept it, not to fuel the problem. But the good thing is when we beg them they calm down. We stabilize the situation, advise them, with any language that we know.⁷⁷

When it comes to naming the political interests manipulating the youth, participants offered a wide range of views, despite broad agreement that politics ruins religion. Many blamed the TPLF-led EPRDF coalition for the current problems, framing its governance and constitutional set-up as premised on a 'strategy of divide and rule'.⁷⁸ In the words of one informant:

Most of the youths in this city were born and raised under the EPRDF regime, under an environment that divided people based on their ethnicity and religion. ... The EPRDF had crafted it in a way that made it easy to systematically create problems among different parts of the community.⁷⁹

Another participant highlighted how, despite an official policy of secularism, the EPRDF government repeatedly interfered in Islamic affairs, thereby sowing the seeds of division.⁸⁰ One informant saw this as merely the local implementation of a '*kaffir*' strategy in the West to divide and weaken Muslims.⁸¹ For some, this corrosive influence had continued on into the present, citing the conflicts between Prime Minister Abiy and former president of Somali Regional State Abdi Ilay, as well as the Tigray War.⁸² Some respondents offered critical feedback of the current government, citing corruption and ethnic favouritism among the security forces, a too swift democratization process leading to insecurity, or the lack of true secularism in politics.⁸³ Beyond blaming specific actors, several participants rather ominously referred to unnamed or 'hidden' actors, pointing to a widespread and somewhat vague sense that religious and ethnic conflicts were never about the issues themselves, but were employed in the service of some

76 Interview with student, Muslim, male, age 23.

77 Interview with pastor, Protestant, male, age 45.

78 Interview with university lecturer, Orthodox, male, age 55.

79 Interview with religious leader, Catholic, male, age 23.

80 Interview with religious leader, Muslim, male, age 57.

81 Interview with religious leader, Muslim, male, age 34.

82 Interviews with bank manager, Orthodox, male, age 34; university lecturer, Orthodox, male, age 55.

83 Interviews with manager, Protestant, male, age 38; Prosperity Party politician, Muslim, female, age 35; university lecturer, Orthodox, male, age 55; Somali intellectual, Muslim, male, age 35.

clandestine power grab.⁸⁴ This was often paired with a desire to construe religions as inherently peaceful, as the following quote from a civil servant demonstrates:

Religion is used to settle conflicts, all religions are peaceful. The conflicts were well planned, organized, and commanded by some hidden party. There are enemies who do not want our unity and that makes them worry. So it is easy for them to support a group that creates disturbance in the city.⁸⁵

Media—especially social media—was mentioned as a factor in this political manipulation and mobilization, although more as a catalyst than an originating factor for conflict.⁸⁶ While one participant noted he no longer consumed media in front of his children,⁸⁷ another called for regulation:

In addition, the current politics of religion started in social media and this should be controlled. Hate speech about other religions or other religious leaders as well as fake information that may create conflict between religions. Social media has become a threat to society because people easily follow it. We need rules to control this.⁸⁸

84 Interviews with bank manager, Orthodox, male, age 34; Prosperity Party politician, Muslim, female, age 35.

85 Interview with civil servant, Orthodox, male, age 32.

86 Interviews with pastor, Protestant, male, age 45; manager, Protestant, male, age 38; bank manager, Orthodox, male, age 34; Prosperity Party politician, Muslim, female, age 35.

87 Interview with manager, Protestant, male, age 38.

88 Interview with Prosperity Party politician, Muslim, female, age 35.

RELIGIONS AND PEACEBUILDING

It was a near universal claim among interviewees that, under ‘normal circumstances’ or ‘previously’, religions were an instrument for peace and not subject to conflict. Whether this accurately reflects the past is perhaps less relevant than the sentiment itself: people expect religions to be active contributors to peaceful inter-communal relations in Dire Dawa, and to help resolve conflict. When looking at the specific examples offered, three main actors for religious peacebuilding emerged: 1) respected religious leaders; 2) religious organizations; and 3) the city administration. Finally, personal relations also featured in many interviews as a resource for inter-religious peace and future hope.

RELIGIOUS LEADERS

As already mentioned in relation to youth and conflict, there was a general expectation that the intervention of religious leaders and elders could calm tempers and prevent conflict escalation. One example that came up in several interviews was the role played by Sheikh Mohammed (Somali), Sheikh Amin Ibro and Sheikh Adem Tula (Oromo) in calming ethnic conflicts between Somali and Oromo youths.⁸⁹ These three sheikhs, who come from different ethnic groups, had themselves come to represent a symbol of peace in the eyes of most. One informant reported that during an outbreak of violence, Somali youth protected the home of Sheikh Amin Ibro, an Oromo.⁹⁰ Apparently, religious leaders not only reached out via the mosques but through broadcasting media as well:

We, the religious leaders, asked ourselves how a Muslim could kill his Muslim brother. We came up with the idea designing programmes called ‘Unity’ and we did a series of activities in both the mosques and in other areas. We taught them verses from the Qur’an and Hadith. It was really good and achieved a lot. We used TV Islama ... This helped us a lot in educating the community, thanks to Allah. ... One of our greatest achievement was that we worked hard in making them understand that their religion comes before their ethnicity. If you love your brother because of Allah, you will be among those who enter paradise, he is your Muslim brother no matter what his ethnicity is. So religion really helped us solve that conflict.⁹¹

89 Interviews with student, Muslim, male, age 28; resident of unspecified vocation, Muslim, male, age 45; religious leader, Muslim, male, age 57; young *ustaz*, Muslim, male, age 30. Sheikh Adem Tula had already passed away during our fieldwork period and was warmly remembered by some of our informants.

90 Interview with young *ustaz*, Muslim, male, age 30.

91 Interview with religious leader, Muslim, male, age 34.

Similarly, traditional and religious leaders also meditated in inter-religious conflicts between Orthodox Christians and Muslims. In one area that had been affected by clashes around a *Təmqāt* procession, informants reported that elders had intervened, and the following year youth came out to distribute water to participants in the Christian procession as a gesture of peace and welcome.⁹²

It should be noted, however, that not all reports about religious leaders were entirely positive. One participant recounted how, when Amin Ibro was sent from the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council to settle the previously mentioned dispute on ethnic representation in the council's Dire Dawa chapter, his intervention was challenged.⁹³ Furthermore, informants from each of the three main religions noted how religious leaders have become a problem by actively stirring up trouble, becoming politically co-opted or working for their own benefit.⁹⁴ Two informants also highlighted the limits of leadership interventions, instead stressing the central role played by lay members in building or resisting peace initiatives.⁹⁵

RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS IN DIRE DAWA

As in all other Ethiopian towns, the Inter-Religious Council (IRC) is the primary organization involved in processes of religious peacebuilding in Dire Dawa. Funded by the state, the IRC was founded in 2010 with the intention of combatting extremism, and established country-wide in parallel with government structures. In Dire Dawa, however, the council does not have a well-furnished office and, contrary to the administration's promises, receives little logistical support. The council currently operates from a government-sector building, and this proximity to government has limited the council's effectiveness, especially when disaffection with the authorities has been high. While council members highlighted the success of their work and felt that levels of acceptance had improved under the most recent Dire Dawa government, at least two participants held more sceptical views, noting the council's work was hampered by its lack of independence or claiming it was a 'government spokesman' rather than looking to 'stand for the truth'.⁹⁶

This divergence of views notwithstanding, members of the IRC highlighted their successes in calming inter-religious tensions in Dire Dawa. They visited the families of victims, spoke out against the violence on public media, maintained close contact between religions, and sought to facilitate dialogue between clashing youths. This was not without opposition. In

92 Interview with businessman, Muslim, male, age 49.

93 Interview with student, Muslim, male, age 28.

94 Interviews with university lecturer, Muslim, male, age 42; Somali intellectual, Muslim, male, age 35; unemployed resident, Muslim, male, age 41; religious minister, Protestant, male, age 25.

95 Interviews with unemployed resident, Muslim, male, age 41; religious minister, Protestant, male, age 25.

96 Interviews with pastor, Protestant, male, age 45; pastor, Protestant, male, age 40; civil servant, Orthodox, male, age 32; university lecturer, Orthodox, male, age 55.

one particularly tense situation, the IRC convened a discussion in a local mosque, only for the council's Orthodox chairman to be heckled by some of those present. The leaders managed to calm the situation and convinced the media present at the event to edit out the controversial footage.⁹⁷ This, however, only sparked further protests by youth the following day. Nonetheless, the fact that the most recent *Təmqät* and *Eid* celebrations had passed peacefully was seen by some informants as being the product of their efforts. According to one informant, the IRC had recently attracted additional funding for peacebuilding activities and conflict awareness training from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), allowing it to extend its activities into the surrounding towns of West Hararge and Harar.⁹⁸ Together with Dire Dawa's mayor, members of the council had also taken a trip to Israel to learn about coexistence of religions.⁹⁹

Even so, the recent withdrawal of the Muslim representative has posed a serious challenge to the IRC. This move appears to be linked to the above-mentioned dispute within the local Islamic Affairs Supreme Council about ethnic representation, with the Islamic Council failing to reappoint a representative for the IRC after the previous member's term had ended. The criticism made of the IRC, however, is that it fails to adequately represent the religious majority situation in the city, as only one of its seven members is Muslim, with the remaining members representing the various Christian denominations.¹⁰⁰ This highlights a structural issue with the IRC, which was founded as a dialogue forum representing the larger religious groups' various apex organizations. This means the religions more prone to fragmentation, such as Protestantism, are likely to have a larger number of representatives.¹⁰¹ It seems an offer has been proposed to allow alternating the Oromo and Somali representative in the IRC as they also take turns in leading the Islamic Council, but the issue had yet to be fully resolved the issue at the time of our fieldwork.¹⁰²

DIRE DAWA ADMINISTRATION

Numerous participants referred to the role played by the Dire Dawa city administration in conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts, with one Protestant pastor observing:

97 Interview with Pastor, Protestant, male, age 40.

98 Interview with Pastor, Protestant, male, age 40.

99 Interview with religious leader, Orthodox, male, age 67.

100 Interviews with pastor, Protestant, male, age 40; religious leader, Orthodox, male, age 67; religious leader, Muslim, male, age un stated.

101 It seems discussions were still ongoing about allowing the new Evangelical Gospel Believers' Council to join. This was founded at the behest of Prime Minister Abiy as an umbrella organisation for all Protestants, but failed to unite them, resulting in yet another Protestant body to be added to inter-religious councils.

102 Interview with pastor, Protestant, male, age 40.

Let me put it this way: the administration must be divided into two, the previous and the current one. The previous one had many limitations, lacked commitment, and was reactive to the problem like fire-fighting. But the current leadership has actively given attention to every problem and proactively worked on the problems and worked with everybody: the youth, the [inter-religious] council. And he [the current mayor] is committed. The city administration has improved a lot. The previous administration did not even give responses to our questions.¹⁰³

Such sentiments were shared by many other informants. The current mayor of Dire Dawa, Kedir Juhar, was mentioned in several interviews as a positive influence. Though he was only elected in August 2022, he is from Dire Dawa and gained experience as deputy mayor. Participants described him as proactive in peacebuilding and dialogue, and very supportive of IRC efforts.¹⁰⁴ In contrast to many other topics addressed in our study, we did not find any divergence of views on the current mayor's administration, although some pointed to structural limits, such as a lack of federal forces to go along with conflict prevention efforts.¹⁰⁵ In addition, much will depend on whether the above-mentioned economic and structural issues can be solved, particularly with regard to disaffected youth. Budget shortages arising from growing demands on social services and a higher federal tax burden point to the scale of this challenge.

PERSONAL INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS, HOPES AND CONCERNS

As already mentioned, many informants cited a standard of inter-religious peace in the city, fortified by strong personal friendships and relations across religions. Participants shared stories of inter-religious (and inter-ethnic) marriages, the joint celebration of each other's religious festivals, inter-religious neighbourhood associations, shared religious principles, and day-to-day encounters with people from other religions at work and at home.¹⁰⁶ This was, however, not entirely without qualification. One Orthodox participant noted how his friendships with Muslims had changed after the conflicts, while another said she avoids debating religious topics with her Muslim neighbours.¹⁰⁷ Two informants mentioned restrictions on inter-religious marriages, with one Muslim interlocutor asserting that to marry outside the faith would be

103 Interview with pastor, Protestant, male, age 45.

104 Interviews with pastor, Protestant, male, age 45; student, Muslim, male, age 28; pastor, Protestant, male, age 40; religious leader, Orthodox, male, age 67; religious leader, Catholic, male, age 23; resident of unspecified profession, Muslim, male, age 45.

105 Interview with civil servant, Orthodox, male, age 32.

106 Interviews with manager, Protestant, male, age 38; bank manager, Orthodox, male, age 34; driver, Orthodox, male, age 23; housewife, Orthodox, female, age 25; Somali intellectual, Muslim, male, age 35; unemployed resident, Muslim, male, age 41; housewife, Orthodox, female, age 25.

107 Interviews with driver, Orthodox, male, age 23; housewife, Orthodox, female, age 25.

a ‘disaster to the family and later to their religion’.¹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, the more widely shared sentiment was that Dire Dawa was exceptional compared to many other places in light of how commonplace inter-religious friendships and family relations are.

Participants painted a similarly optimistic picture when asked about their expectations for the future. Many expected that inter-religious peace would be rebuilt and retained, usually paired with an exhortation about actively working for peace.¹⁰⁹ For some, the state of the wider country provoked significant uncertainty, leading to fears that further conflict might come to Dire Dawa from other places, perhaps even instigated by ‘the West’.¹¹⁰ As already mentioned, social media was seen as cause for concern, as well as the quality of religious and political leaders.¹¹¹ Overall, though, the interviews revealed a sense of resilience and optimism that inter-religious co-existence will continue despite troubling times, as exemplified by the words of one informant:

Even if in the past we had ups and downs, the community has certain values, and we have a history of religions existing [together] for long time. But that does not mean that all will go smoothly. There were bad times nationally and in Dire Dawa. I expect the future to be also the same.¹¹²

108 Interviews with religious leader, Catholic, male, age 23; Prosperity Party politician, Muslim, female, age 35.

109 Interviews with pastor, Protestant, male, age 45; businessman and evangelist, Protestant, male, age 50; bank manager, Orthodox, male, age 34; religious leader, Catholic, male, age 23; housewife, Orthodox, female, age 25; unemployed resident, traditional religion, male, age 51; resident of unspecified vocation, Muslim, male, age 45; religious leader, Muslim, male, age 57; housewife, Orthodox, female, age 25; religious minister, Protestant, male, age 25.

110 Interviews with student, Muslim, male, age 28; manager, Protestant, male, age 38; civil servant, Orthodox, male, age 32; businessman, Muslim, male, age 49; university lecturer, Orthodox, male, age 55.

111 Interviews with Prosperity Party politician, Muslim, female, age 35; Somali intellectual, Muslim, male, age 35.

112 Resident of unspecified vocation, Orthodox, male, age 23.

CONCLUSIONS

As a multi-ethnic and multi-religious economic hub in the eastern region of Ethiopia, Dire Dawa is attractive to many. There was an overarching sense in our research of a historical norm of inter-religious and inter-ethnic conviviality being rather abruptly disturbed by the various instances of inter-communal violence since 2018.

Our study has revealed the inter-related ethnic and religious identity politics underlying these conflicts. Dire Dawa sits on the contested boundary line between the Oromia and Somali regions, with the city's chartered status forming an important compromise. Settlement movements and political ownership claims have, however, kept Dire Dawa a contested territory. The administrative formula of 40:40:20 is both a solution to and symptom of ethnic politics. While it provides some kind of settlement within which the city administration can allocate positions to the Islamic Affairs Supreme Council, it also creates a contested arena for further disputes on what an accurate reflection of the city's ethnic diversity should be. Concerted de-escalation efforts seem necessary here, perhaps most importantly in ensuring economic resources and political power are shared equitably regardless of an office holder's ethnic identity.

While the initial round of post-EPRDF conflicts in the city could be read as purely ethnic clashes, external and internal factors have now drawn religious identity into the fray. Inter-religious clashes elsewhere in Ethiopia and a sense of rising religious dispute among the youth have influenced the atmosphere in Dire Dawa, contributing to rising expectations of inter-religious conflict. Even so, the predominant factor in how the conflicts have played out seems to be a local one. When the central ethnic controversy evolved from an intra-Muslim (Oromo vs. Somali) rivalry into a Christian-Muslim one (Amhara vs. Oromo/Somali), it acquired a religious dimension. Given the territorial nature of these disputes, it is little wonder that Orthodox *Təmqāt* processions became the major flashpoint, being seen as a spatial infringement of Amhara Christian symbols on Muslim Somali or Oromo areas.

While these clashes gave way to a generalized perception of rising inter-religious conflict and dispute, our study found little evidence of this actually being the case. Issues of trust certainly emerged and there was an occasional tendency to attribute extremism to the religious other or outside actors, but not a single participant denied the right of any religion to exist and flourish in the city. Overall, religious grievances were articulated in a discourse of victimhood rather than expressions of aggression.

This leaves considerable room for peacebuilding work. As our study indicates, there is a widespread view in Dire Dawa that the recent clashes have not fundamentally altered the prospects of inter-religious peace in the city, even if one must reckon with disruptions and

invest more in peacebuilding activities. Religious actors have an important role to play here, and informants testified to religious leaders working to calm both inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions. Such interventions seem to have broad public support, especially as the conflict is often framed in terms of a misdirected and politically instrumentalized youth. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the active role the youth are playing in conflict alleviation, particularly where the influence of older leaders might be limited. Internal divisions are a further limiting factor. The debate on ethnic representation within the Islamic Affairs Supreme Council demonstrates that while religious leaders may be working hard to prevent inter-communal clashes at the grassroots, they face difficulties bridging the same differences when engaging in high-level politics.

More institutionalized forms of inter-religious dialogue, such as the IRC, have played a role in peacebuilding efforts, although it is difficult to assess their overall impact. Active members of the IRC spoke highly of their own work, whereas other participants seemed more sceptical of the council's impact. It seems prudent to expect that the primary power vector for peacebuilding will remain the influence of religious leaders on their constituents, with forums such as the IRC possibly serving as a venue to co-ordinate such efforts. A further factor limiting the IRC's impact is that it appears to have become a site of contestation itself, with the Muslim side pushing for greater representation. This debate suggests there may be substantial shifts in the IRC's work and mode of operation in future, the impact of which is difficult to estimate at present.

Our study has also shown the politics of ethnicity and religion are subject to a range of contextual factors, the most important of which are overall economic pressures, youth unemployment, competition over land, and the gradual ethnic and religious homogenization of suburban settlements. This provides significant scope for administrative intervention above and beyond direct dialogue and peacebuilding activities. Creating more economic opportunities, setting up transparent processes for land allocation that facilitate community participation, and setting out zoning plans that promote ethnic and religious pluralization in each of the city's suburbs would go a long way in preventing further conflict.

REFERENCES

- ACLED. 'Ethiopia Peace Observatory Weekly: 23 April–6 May 2022'. 12 May 2022. (<https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-peace-observatory-weekly-23-april-6-may-2022-enam>)
- Addis Standard*. 'News: Dire Dawa City Admin refutes reports of referendum to decide on city's future'. 20 January 2023. (<https://addisstandard.com/news-dire-dawa-city-admin-refutes-reports-of-referendum-to-decide-on-citys-future/>)
- . 'News: Fourth day protests leave one dead, many injured in Dire Dawa city'. 25 January 2019. (<https://addisstandard.com/news-fourth-day-protests-leave-one-dead-many-injured-in-dire-dawa-city>; <https://borkena.com/2019/01/29/dire-dawa-police-arrested-308-suspects>)
- Belew Worku. 'Historical-Sociology of Interaction in the city of Dawa—Dawa: The case of Oromo–Somali ethnic groups'. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications* 7/3 (March 2017).
- Borkena*. 'One man killed in Dire Dawa, seven wounded during Timkat'. 21 January 2020. (<https://borkena.com/2020/01/21/ethiopia-one-man-killed-in-dire-dawa-seven-wounded-during-timkat/>)
- Central Statistical Agency (CSA). 'The 2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia: Statistical Report for Dire Dawa Council'. 2007.
- . 'Ethiopia 2021 Labour and Migration Survey: Key Findings'. August 2021. (www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Final-2021-LABOUR-FORCE-AND-MIGRATION-SURVEY_Key-finding-Report-.17AUG2021.pdf)
- Dereje Feyissa, Milkessa Midega and Ketema Wakjira. 'Expectations and belonging in Dire Dawa Drivers, dynamics and challenges of rural to urban mobility'. Rift Valley Institute, February 2008. (<https://riftvalley.net/publication/expectations-and-belonging-dire-dawa-o>)
- Ethiopia Observer*. 'Dire Dawa seeks harmony as ethnic tensions run high'. 13 April 2019. (www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2019/04/13/dire-dawa-seeks-harmony-as-ethnic-tensions-run-high/)
- Ezega News. 'One Person Killed, Seven Wounded During Gunfire in Dire Dawa City'. 22 January 2020. (www.ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/7675/One-Person-Killed-Seven-Wounded-During-Gunfire-in-Dire-Dawa-City)
- . 'At Least 10 People Dead in Gondar During Epiphany Celebrations'. 20 January 2020. (www.

ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/7667/At-Least-10-People-Dead-in-Gondar-During-Epiphany-Celebrations)

Federal Negarit Gazeta of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Proclamation No. 416/200430. July 2004.

Hagmann, Tobias and Mustafe Mohamed Abdi. 'Inter-ethnic violence in Ethiopia's Somali

Regional State, 2017–2018'. LSE Conflict Research Programme Research Memo, March 2020. (www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/Conflict-Research-Programme/crp-memos/Inter-ethnic-conflicts-SRS-Final-April-2020.pdf)

Hiiraan Online. 'At Least Two People Dead in Ethnic Clashes in Dire Dawa City'. 20 November 2019. (www.hiiraan.com/news4/2019/Nov/166190/at_least_two_people_dead_in_ethnic_clashes_in_dire_dawa_city.aspx)

International Crisis Group. 'CrisisWatch: Ethiopia'. August 2018. (www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/august-2018)

Mistir Sew, 'Dire Dawa's Dilemma: Sharing Power in Ethiopia's Eastern Melting Pot'. *Ethiopia Insight*. 2 August 2021. (www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/08/02/dire-dawas-dilemma-sharing-power-in-ethiopias-eastern-melting-pot)

Özerdem, Alpaslan. 'The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities'. Oxford Research Group, 2016. (<https://gdc.unicef.org/resource/role-youth-peacebuilding-challenges-and-opportunities#:~:text=BLOG/OPINION-,The%20Role%20of%20Youth%20in%20Peacebuilding%3A%20Challenges%20and%20Opportunities,ALPASLAN%20OZERDEM,-SOURCE%>)

Shaban, Abdur Rahman Alfa. 'Djibouti airlifts citizens from Dire Dawa, affirms ties with Ethiopia'. *Africanews*, 8 August 2018. (www.africanews.com/2018/08/08/djibouti-airlifts-citizens-from-dire-dawa-affirms-ties-with-ethiopia/#:~:text=The%20security%20crisis%20in%20Dire%20Dawa%20escalated%20as%20part%20of%20a%20federal%20and%20regional%20government%20clash%20in%20the%20Somali%20regional%20state)

—. 'Ethiopia's Somali regional politics: new leader, Abdi Illey charged, Liyu police'. *Africanews*, 30 August 2018. (www.africanews.com/2018/08/30/ethiopias-somali-regional-politics-new-leader-abdi-illey-charged-liyu-police/)

UNHCR. 'Dire Dawa Information Brochure'. (https://help.unhcr.org/kenya/wp-content/uploads/sites/29/2021/06/Dire-Dawa-City_Information-Brochure.pdf)

VOA. 'ጵጵዳዋ ለጎ ቸግግቶቿ [Dreda and her problems]'. 30 November 2018. (<https://amharic.voanews>.

[com/a/dire-dawa-conflict-/4681772.html](https://www.zhujiworld.com/a/dire-dawa-conflict-/4681772.html))

ZhujiWorld.com. 'Dire Dawa, Ethiopia — statistics'. (<https://zhujiworld.com/et/208101-dire-dawa-region/>)



Rift Valley Institute
MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK

riftvalley.net



**Peace
Research
Facility**