

RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN GONDAR:

LOCAL PERSPECTIVES ON POLARIZATION
AND PEACE-BUILDING

Yihenuw Alemu Tesfaye & Fasika Gedif



Rift Valley Institute
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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.

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ABBREVIATIONS

EPRDF	Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front
IRCE	Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia
TPLF	Tigray People’s Liberation Front

SUMMARY

- Gondar city is known for centuries of peaceful coexistence between its Muslim and Orthodox Christian community members. These inter-religious relations have, however, deteriorated over recent decades, erupting into view in the April 2022 attack on Muslim mourners and subsequent inter-communal clashes that prompted demonstrations and counter-reactions in multiple cities across Ethiopia.
- Study participants pointed to a variety of underlying causes for the decline in relations, including inter-religious competition (mainly between Muslims and Christians over land and places of worship), intra-religious divergence, divisive teachings/preaching in churches and mosques, and political interference in religion.
- Gondar's residents still seem divided over even the bare facts of the April 2022 conflict. Muslim study participants generally described a higher number of casualties than Orthodox participants, and insisted the Piassa mosque had been burned to the ground, which was disputed by Orthodox interviewees. Such divergences show how the conflict continues to shape information politics.
- One frequently shared sentiment is that Ethiopia's wider politics have proven detrimental to inter-religious relations in Gondar, with the past three decades of ethnolinguistic federalism having amplified ethnic and religious differences. Moreover, while Orthodox Christians often associate the conflict with Muslim intra-religious differences, blaming increasing public tensions on the rise of 'Wahhabism', Muslims place the blame on the divisive teachings of Orthodox associations such as Mahibere Kidusan.
- Despite the government being regarded as mostly unhelpful, our study identified four important resources for restoring peaceful inter-religious relations. Firstly, while expectations about the future are mixed, no participant accepted inter-religious conflict as the norm. Secondly, informants lauded indigenous conflict resolution processes, with hope expressed that these could be applied in Gondar city. Thirdly, participants acknowledged the potential for genuine inter-religious peacebuilding forums, run by respected religious leaders and elders rather than imposed by government. Fourthly, government can improve its role more generally when it comes to conflict prevention.

INTRODUCTION

The April 2022 attack on Muslim mourners in Gondar and subsequent clashes shocked the Ethiopian nation and made international headlines,¹ prompting demonstrations and counter-reactions in multiple cities across the country. Thus far, no official report about the incident has been released, aside from a brief, generalized press release posted on Facebook by the federal Ministry of Justice in July 2022 referring to the clashes in Gondar alongside two additional incidents that took place in Southern Ethiopia.² This report, based on first-hand fieldwork by the authors, is to the best of our knowledge the only independent academic study currently available on the conflict. As well as conducting interviews with 28 participants over two weeks in Gondar city in October 2022, we visited some of the conflict sites and listened to conversations in town. A snowballing method was used to seek interview partners, utilizing the various contacts we had in the field. We did, however, ensure a broad selection of interview partners in terms of age, gender, religion and occupation. Our study can therefore be seen as representative in a qualitative sense: it makes accessible a wide range of views in Gondar regarding the violence of 2022. Even so, we cannot claim on the basis of such a small sample that any of the articulated views are representative of—or even predominant in—the town as a whole.

Section 1 of the report provides an overview of Gondar’s religious history and present demographic composition. Section 2 then outlines the April 2022 conflict and articulates the various perceptions expressed by informants about its causes. Following this, section 3 explores religious peacebuilding institutions and resources in Gondar, before some brief conclusions are offered.

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- 1 It is important to note that even the terminology used to describe the incident is disputed. Many of our informants would not describe the violence as an attack on Muslims. The only Ethiopian government press briefing on the incident used the word ‘clash’ (ግጭታ), to which the Gondar Islamic Affairs Council objected, stating that this term attributed equal blame when Muslims were clearly the target of the attacks. FDRE Ministry of Justice, Facebook post, 14 July 2022. www.facebook.com/MOJEthiopia/posts/413911490779599/; Gondar Town Administrative Islamic Affairs Council Office, ‘Statement of the FDRE press release’, 15 July 2022. <https://ms-my.facebook.com/haruntube/photos/pcb.1482408355541459/148240813887481>.
 - 2 FDRE Ministry of Justice, Facebook post, 14 July 2022. www.facebook.com/MOJEthiopia/posts/413911490779599/.
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GONDAR: HISTORY AND SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: SETTLEMENT PATTERNS AND DIFFERENT IMAGERIES

Since Gondar's early formation as an urban centre in the seventeenth century, the town has embraced diverse settlements of people and religious groups, including Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Bete Israel, Catholics, Protestants and Qemant.³ Like the Bete Israel, the Qemant were an ethno-religious group specific to northern Ethiopia.⁴ Their status as a (traditional) religious group is less clearly pronounced, however, and they are often regarded as simply an ethnic group. Ethnic and religious identities in early Gondar were highly associated with an individual's occupation and their involvement in the city's economy. While Muslims were mainly engaged in trade, weaving and tailoring jobs, Orthodox Christians took up occupations in farming, public administration and the military services.⁵ The Bete Israel, in turn, were engaged as blacksmiths and builders,⁶ whereas the Qemant were mainly agriculturalists, labourers, soldiers, guards and construction workers.⁷ These diverse communities complemented one another and propelled Gondar's economy.

This is not to say that the city's religious communities were fully integrated or maintained a steady, peaceful coexistence. The segregation of settlements, partly by the Yohannis I edict

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- 3 R. A. Klein, 'We Do Not Eat Meat with the Christians: Interaction and Integration between the Beta Israel and Amhara Christians of Gondar, Ethiopia', PhD dissertation, University of Florida, 2007, 49; J. Quirin, 'Caste and class in historical north-west Ethiopia: The Beta Israel (Falasha) and Kemant, 1300-1900', *The Journal of African History* 39/2 (1998): 205.
 - 4 F. C. Gamst, *The Qemant: A Pagan-Hebraic Peasantry of Ethiopia*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969, 8.
 - 5 Abdussamad H. Ahmad, 'Muslims of Gondar 1864-1941', *Annales d'Ethiopie* 16 (2000): 162. www.persee.fr/doc/ethio_0066-2127_2000_num_16_1_971.
 - 6 J. Quirin, 'The Process of Caste Formation in Ethiopia: A Study of the Beta Israel (Felasha), 1270-1868', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 12/2 (1979): 244. www.jstor.org/stable/218834; Solomon Addis Getahun, 'Urbanization and the Urban Space in Africa: The Case of Gondar, Ethiopia', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 45 (2012): 122. www.jstor.org/stable/44325777.
 - 7 Quirin, 'Caste and class', 206; J. Quirin, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews: A History of the Bete Israel (Falasha) to 1920*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 98.

of 1668, discouraged religious groups from maintaining close social bonds.⁸ This segregation still forms part of the historical memory expressed by our study participants. They recounted how in former Gondar, Orthodox Christians settled near the castle and its surrounding areas, establishing neighbourhoods around the churches, whereas Muslims settled in the area known as Addis Alem, also known as Islam bet (Islam house),⁹ an area below Kidame Gebeya (Saturday market). The Bete Israel resided in Kayla Meda, crossing the river Qeha in the West,¹⁰ while the Qemant settled around the periphery of the earlier Gondar.¹¹ As the town grew, city settlements were named according to the identity and occupation of their residents, for example, Echege bet, Ras bet, Qeng Bet, Islam bet, Abun bet and Gra bet.¹²

Although settlement patterns limited social integration in Gondar, imperial policies ‘tolerated religious diversity, and attempted to incorporate various groups into dominant political and economic institutions’.¹³ The Bete Israel, Qemant and Muslims were incorporated and allowed to run government authorities.¹⁴ For instance, the position of Negadras, chief of customs, was occupied by Muslims.¹⁵ Moreover, as Hussein Ahmed puts it, ‘kings employed Muslims for diplomatic and commercial missions’.¹⁶ The Qemant were also close to the political and military institutions, trusted by monarchs and bestowed with land usage rights, as well as military or

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- 8 Quirin, ‘Caste and class’, 207. Different reasons can be cited for this religious segregation. Some contend that it was in the interests of religious elites (Bete Israel and Qemant) to remain separated in order to maintain religious integrity (see Quirin, ‘Caste and class’, 208; Quirin, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews*, 89; R. A. Klein, ‘We Do Not Eat Meat with the Christians’, 50). Others hold that it was done partly to keep the king’s ‘idiosyncratic’ interest and partly to manipulate religion for political ends, so that the religious groups would not have interactions as the city grew (see Ahmad, ‘Muslims of Gondar’, 164). Related to this, as noted by Pankhurst, the religious and ethnic groups’ close interaction led to ‘quarrels and disputes’ among them (see Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Towns*, 127 as cited in R. A. Klein, ‘We Do Not Eat Meat with the Christians’, 49), which led to the king declaring a policy of separate settlement.
- 9 Abdussamad, ‘Muslims of Gondar 1864–1941’, 164; Solomon, ‘Urbanization and the Urban Space’, 122.
- 10 Solomon, ‘Urbanization and the Urban Space’, 122–123.
- 11 Quirin, ‘Caste and class’, 206.
- 12 R. Pankhurst, ‘Ethiopian Medieval and Post-Medieval Capitals: Their Development and Principal Features’, *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 14/1 (1979): 14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00672707909511260>; Solomon, ‘Urbanization and the Urban Space’, 123.
- 13 Quirin, ‘The Process of Caste’, 246.
- 14 Quirin, ‘The Process of Caste’, 245; Solomon, ‘Urbanization and the Urban Space’, 122; Ahmad, ‘Muslims of Gondar’, 170.
- 15 Abdussamad, ‘Muslims of Gondar’, 170.
- 16 Hussein Ahmed, ‘Coexistence and/or Confrontation?: Towards a Reappraisal of Christian–Muslim Encounter in Contemporary Ethiopia’, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 36, Fasc. 1 (2006): 6. www.jstor.org/stable/27594361.

political positions.¹⁷ Similarly, the Bete Israel were also incorporated, to some extent, into society's broader political economy through their occupational roles.¹⁸ Settlement patterns continued to change following Gondar's loss of status as a royal city. With the commencement of the age of princes (1796–1855), the political centre shifted from Gondar to Debre Tabor (about 150 km south of Gondar city), further weakening the city's political significance. Gondar experienced several crises after it lost its political status and was destroyed by Dervishes,¹⁹ leading to declining population numbers in the early eighteenth century. As a result of this decline, Gondar's significance continued to fluctuate over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁰ The most adverse changes to residential divisions were brought about by the Italian occupation of the 1930s. The Italians divided the city along racial lines, occupying the most elevated areas to the north and west of the castle.²¹ Having served as a regional capital for the Italian governorate during the occupation, Gondar city went on to stagnate,²² with no significant progress observed during the Haile Selassie regime.²³ Under the Derg regime (1974–1991), some of the settlement areas formed by the Italians were replaced by detention centres for youth groups accused of being Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party members. These mass detentions and executions caused scores of Gondar residents to flee to Sudan and then to Western countries, many of whom formed diaspora communities and later provided considerable remittance inflows to the city.²⁴

After the overthrow of the Derg regime in 1991, the detention areas were transformed into residential sites, with modern apartment blocks constructed and academic institutions established.²⁵ This was accompanied by a degree of social unrest. While Muslims welcomed the end of the Gondar city's segregated settlement policies, which they perceived as disadvantaging them, many Orthodox Christians regarded the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)-led policy as actively encouraging Muslim minorities to settle in Christian majority areas of the city. According to this view, the EPRDF measures were seen as a divide-and-rule strategy aimed at utilizing minorities to weaken the Orthodox majority in a city

17 Gamst, *The Qemant*, 9.

18 Quirin, 'Caste and class', 206, 210.

19 Mulatu Wubneh, 'Urban resilience and sustainability of the city of Gondar (Ethiopia) in the face of adverse historical changes', *Planning Perspectives* 36/2 (2021): 4–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2020.1753104>; and Bahru Zewde, 'Gondär In the Early Twentieth Century: A Preliminary Investigation of a 1930/31 Census', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 21 (1988): 60. www.jstor.com/stable/41965962.

20 Pankhurst, 'Ethiopian Medieval', 8; Mulatu, 'Urban resilience', 4–7.

21 Mulatu, 'Urban resilience', 10; Solomon, 'Urbanization and the Urban Space', 125.

22 Mulatu, 'Urban resilience', 8.

23 Mulatu, 'Urbanization and the Urban Space', 128.

24 Mulatu, 'Urban resilience', 10; Solomon, 'Urbanization and the Urban Space', 125.

25 Solomon, 'Urbanization and the Urban Space', 130–132.

regarded as a threat to the party's power. In particular, the new Muslim businesses and religious institutions in the centre of the city were perceived by the Orthodox Christian community as working against their interests. Disputes over land arose, and some controversial decisions even made national headlines. This led to inter-religious tensions and a sense of Christian–Muslim rivalry, with many residents seeing the administratively-led changes to settlement patterns as altering the religious identity of various quarters, even the town as a whole.

CONTEMPORARY DEMOGRAPHICS

Currently, Gondar city is expanding to the south, giving rise to so-called 'newer Gondar', which has emerged as the city's main commercial and residential hub.²⁶ As a result, Gondar city's current settlement pattern appears to be moving beyond segregation and towards people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds moving together into 'newer Gondar' and other outskirts where the city is expanding.

Within this diversification of settlement patterns, however, a clear religious majority pertains. The 2007 national census identifies Gondar city's religious composition as 84.14 per cent Orthodox, 11.77 per cent Muslim and 1.05 per cent Protestant. Only 0.08 per cent identified as Catholic and 0.03 per cent as 'traditional', while the open category of 'others' amounted to 2.9 per cent. The percentage for the Orthodox community in Gondar city is smaller than in Gondar district overall (94.7 per cent) or North Gondar zone as a whole (95.3 per cent). Conversely, the proportions for Protestants (district: 0.02 per cent; zone: 0.1 per cent) and Muslims (district: 5.2 per cent; zone: 4.2 per cent) are drastically lower outside the city.²⁷ On ethnicity, there is less divergence between rural and urban data in the census: in the rural areas of North Gondar zone, 98.3 per cent of respondents identified as Amhara, only slightly higher than the 97.8 per cent in urban areas.²⁸ These numbers show that a large proportion of Gondar's Muslims must have identified as Amhara in the census, despite Amhara ethnicity often being identified with Orthodoxy.

Remittances, trade, agriculture, tourism, service and to some extent manufacturing play a significant role in Gondar's economy.²⁹ Gondar city's nearby rural and semi-urban administrative zones are known for cash crop production and agricultural investments, which attracts huge numbers of seasonal labour workers to Western and Central Gondar zones and surrounding rural kebeles (the country's lowest administrative unit). This seasonal labour force tends to reside in Gondar city and surrounding kebeles between agricultural seasons, increasing the

26 Solomon, 'Urbanization and the Urban Space', 130–133.

27 Central Statistical Authority (CSA), 'The 2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia: Statistical Report for Amhara Region; Part I: Population Size and Characteristics', 2007, 164–165.

28 It is important to note that the Qemant were not a recognised ethnicity in the 2007 census, and many of them would probably have self-identified as Amhara.

29 Mulatu, 'Urban resilience', 22.

economic and security concerns faced by the city and its residents. According to a 2014 survey by the municipality, the overall unemployment rate is 18.2 per cent, although youth unemployment is higher at 27.5 per cent.³⁰

Gondar city, as a major city located close to Ethiopia's main cash crop producing zones and situated in the business corridor along the border with Sudan, has enormous potential for economic development. Over the past two decades, Gondar city has seen the size of its population increase significantly. Between the first (1984) and third (2007) census, the population of the city saw a two-and-a-half fold increase. According to a recent estimate in a Development Partners report, the city's population stood at 471,000.³¹ The municipality claims a much higher population figure of 710,000, which takes into account the several small towns surrounding the city. In light of this increasing population, projected land use figures for 2025 suggest demand for open space and environment in the city will increase five-fold. This projection, coupled with the rising number of residential house development programmes in the city, mean access to land has become a pressing issue.³²

This pressure on land is reflected in increasing property demands for churches, mosques and worship areas, leading to highly competitive inter-religious encounters. The building of more mosques in different parts of the city, mainly on purchased or donated private lands, has provoked suspicion among the Orthodox community and a sense of a competitive interest by the Muslim community to equal the number of Orthodox churches in the city. Meanwhile, some in the Muslim community feel there has been an Orthodox attempt to dominate the city in reaction to the loss of national dominance. As one informant claimed:

In my opinion, a feudalistic Orthodox spirit seeks to dominate other religions, particularly after Dr Abiy Ahmed gained control over the central authority. They believe Dr Abiy Ahmed is a Muslim so they started to reorganize against this.³³

This is indicative of how a climate of mutual suspicion has resulted in issues of land and public visibility becoming intertwined with anxieties about political control.

PERCEPTIONS OF CURRENT INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS

Most informants reported that Gondar had a long history of peaceful inter-religious coexistence between Christians and Muslims. Many, however, felt that in the recent decades inter-religious relations had deteriorated. This was ascribed to inter-religious competition (mainly between Muslims and Christians over land and places of worship), intra-religious divergence, divisive

30 Mulatu, 'Urban resilience', 21.

31 As cited by Mulatu, 'Urban resilience'.

32 Mulatu, 'Urban resilience', 15–16.

33 Interview with high school teacher, Muslim, male, age 60.

teachings/preaching in churches and mosques, and political interference in religion.

Many informants blamed a particular ‘other group’ for problems facing ‘their group’, resulting in strained encounters between members of the two groups. Accordingly, participants’ accounts of current inter-religious relations and their perceptions of possible future improvements varied. While some believed relations have deteriorated and will take time to improve, other were more optimistic, asserting that inter-religious relations in Gondar city can be easily restored, as tensions only emerged in the first place due to the actions of ‘bad’ political actors. The latter cite the apparent tranquillity after the conflict as indicating improved relations. This difference of perception is reflected in the ongoing reports of tensions in Gondar that continue to emerge intermittently.



INTER-COMMUNAL CONFLICT AND LOCAL CONFLICT PERCEPTIONS

Gondar has been significantly impacted by inter-communal conflicts in recent years. Initially, these were identified as primarily ethnic (mainly between Qemant and Amhara communities), but now seem to have taken a religious turn. The difficult political situation in Gondar reflects the complicated nature of Ethiopia's politics. Even before the demise of the EPRDF regime, Gondar had seen violent clashes described as a 'microcosm of Ethiopia's [predicament]: a toxic brew of uneven development, polarised debate amid a virtual media vacuum, contested history, ethnic tensions, a fragmented opposition and an authoritarian government'.³⁴ The increased fragility of the state following the change of government in 2018 has only brought these tensions to the fore.³⁵ Since then, violent conflicts have escalated in Gondar city and its surrounding zones. Between January and October 2019 alone, an estimated 130 people died and thousands were displaced due to inter-communal conflicts.³⁶

The causes of these earlier conflicts are understood differently by Qemant and Amhara communities. While the former associate them with the Qemant people's quest for recognition, the latter relate them to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and its agenda to destabilize Gondar and Amhara.³⁷ Continuous conflicts between these communities in 2019 and 2020, mostly in Central and Western Gondar Zones, were reported to have claimed hundreds of lives, destroyed millions of birr worth of property, and displaced thousands of people.³⁸ Ethnic conflict between Qemant and Amhara communities appears to have decreased since late 2020, with no serious clashes reported since November 2020. This coincides with the start of the war

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- 34 W. Davison, 'Ethnic tensions in Gondar reflect the toxic nature of Ethiopian politics', *The Guardian*, 22 December 2016. www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/dec/22/gondar-ethiopia-ethnic-tensions-toxic-politics; see also Deutsche Welle, 'Interfaith tensions simmer in Ethiopia after attack in Gondar', *Frontline*, 7 May 2022. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/dispatches/interfaith-tensions-simmer-in-ethiopia-after-attack-in-gondar/article65395969.ece>.
- 35 Omni Consult., 'Conflict Mapping and Context Analysis for Peace Building Programme in Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia', Norwegian Church Aid Ethiopia, 2020, 28. [conflict-mapping-and-context-analysis-2020.pdf](#).
- 36 Deutsche Welle, 'Interfaith tensions'.
- 37 Omni Consult., 'Conflict Mapping', 67–68.
- 38 Yihewew Tesfaye et al., 'Inter-communal Tensions, Violence and Extremism in the Time of a Pandemic in Ethiopia', European Institute of Peace, 2021, 22–23. www.eip.org/publication/inter-communal-tensions-violence-and-conflicts-in-the-time-of-a-pandemic-in-ethiopia/; Omni Consult., 'Conflict Mapping', 67.

between the TPLF and the federal government together with its allied regional forces, which began on 4 November 2020. Nonetheless, the Gondar city administrative and security leaders interviewed for this study associated the decline in ethnic conflict with organized peacebuilding efforts led by the government in collaboration with religious institutions, their leaders and community members.

THE CLASH OF APRIL 2022

Although ethnic conflict appears to have declined in Gondar, it seems to have been replaced by religious conflict, sparked by the clashes that shocked Gondar city in late April 2022.

The initial clash occurred during a funeral service arranged for a prominent sheikh, who died on 26 April 2022. Sheikh Kemal was known by his renowned father's name, and like his late father used to provide traditional medicinal services for people living in Gondar city and its surrounding areas. Given how revered Sheikh Kemal was by the city's Muslims and Christians, some members of the Muslim community planned for his funeral service to be completed at a former Muslim cemetery known by the name Haji Elias. Haji Elias is located close to Gondar's early Muslim settlement of Addis Alem and was a major Muslim burial site during the early twentieth century. Haji Elias has since been declared a heritage site, and people are only rarely, and with special permission, buried there. A few hundred metres to the west of Haji Elias is an Ethiopian Orthodox Church called Abera/Abwara Giyorgis. The river Qeha that roughly divides Gondar into two halves also runs between both religious sites and acts as a natural if disputed boundary.

As community members (mostly Muslims) prepared the graveyard for the funeral service, a rumour spread among Christian community members that the funeral organizers had removed and used rocks from the church's property. This led to altercations and then open conflict between young Muslim and Christian community members at the cemetery. After a few minutes, a grenade— as mentioned by most participants — was detonated where Muslims community members were gathered, leaving at least one dead and three others injured.

Following the explosion, several gunshots were heard. The situation at the cemetery was quickly brought under control by the city's security forces, but the funeral service was postponed until the following day. A few hours later, however, a group of young Muslim community members started marching towards the centre of the city (participants noted they were headed in the direction of the city's administration), shouting 'allahu akbar' as they carried the body of the person who had died during the explosion. In the meantime, a group of people alleged to be members of the Orthodox Christian community tried to block the demonstrators path. The situation spiralled out of control, with repeated gunfire and grenade explosions ensuing from about 2 pm to 4 pm. During these clashes, Muslim community members' shops and properties, most of them located in Arada sub-city, were destroyed and some set aflame. Mosques also came under attack, although the extent of the damage they suffered was difficult to obtain due to conflicting reports (see below). Christian shops were vandalized and looted as well.

As government forces gained control over the situation, several people associated with the violence and robberies were apprehended by police. Some have since been sentenced to prison time, others have been released, and some are still awaiting a court verdict. To date, there has only been a single brief government report (in fact, a press release on Facebook) into the conflict, which establishes a basic timeline from police reports, provides the number of total casualties (20 killed, 100 injured), and notes how many suspects were arrested (509), released (310) and tried (103). On costs, the report notes a dispute between faith leaders, who claim the damage amounted to 300 million ETB, and the city administration, which estimates the figure as being a much lower 60 million ETB. This discrepancy indicates how figures about the conflict are easily disputed, and that in the absence of a detailed, independent report, many will regard the figures provided by the government press release as politically motivated.

Gondar's residents still seems divided over even the bare facts of the conflict. Whereas Muslim study participants generally described higher number of casualties and insisted that all the victims were Muslim, Orthodox participants estimated a lower number of casualties and described them as both Christian and Muslim. In terms of damaged shops and stolen property, Muslim and Orthodox accounts largely converged. This was not the case, however, for the destruction of mosques. In line with the government report, which noted that one mosque was completely destroyed and ten others were severely or somewhat damaged, Muslim participants insisted that the Piassa mosque had been burned to the ground and further mosques had been damaged. Orthodox interviewees disagreed, claiming that not a single mosque had been set on fire, and that only external property within the mosques' compounds had been set alight. When one of our researchers visited the area of the Piassa mosque, he found no indication of it having been burned to the ground, although he witnessed damage to the windows of the outer mosque complex. Informants asserted that no repairs or renovations had yet been carried out, or compensation received, so it seems unlikely that such extensive damage to the mosque would already have been repaired. We also spoke to a sub-city security head to further establish the facts.³⁹ The official contradicted the government press release, claiming no mosque buildings had been set on fire. He did, however, confirm that Muslim-owned shops were damaged and burned, and both Muslim and Orthodox-owned shops were robbed. Like the government report, he noted that 'both sides have lost 20 people' in total, but also contended that on the basis of ID cards and bank accounts, four of the deceased had come from Addis Ababa four days before the clashes 'for the purpose of robbery'. Such divergences show how the conflict continues to shape information politics.

Many participants acknowledged they were not present during the conflict and were reliant on hearsay. Even so, our interviews document how Christian and Muslim discourses have continued to drift apart in the wake of the clashes. Moreover, we heard stories of further community division. As a response to hostilities against Muslims, including the destruction of Muslim shops during the conflict, Muslim shop owners closed their premises for several days following the conflict. These closures proved difficult for many people in Gondar, as there

39 Interview with sub-city security head, Orthodox, male, age 35.

were not enough Christian-owned shops to provide people with basic food items. This created a sense among the Orthodox Christian community that their daily basic needs are under the control of Muslims, initiating a movement to establish bakeries and small shops owned and controlled by Christians, in part with the help of Mahibere Kidusan (an Orthodox Church religious association). All this points to how conflicts such as those seen in Gondar city can function as a catalyst for further inter-religious divisions.

PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICS AS THE UNDERLYING CAUSE

The underlying cause of the April 2022 religious conflict in Gondar city was perceived differently by community members, religious institutions, politicians, and administrative and security leaders. One of the main perceived causes of the conflict was a shift in political focus from ethnic to religious differences, with the intention of exploiting religious spaces for political purposes.⁴⁰ Many participants, including local security and administration leaders, as well as community members, agreed with this perception, labelling the conflict an extension of the TPLF's attempts to destabilize Amhara region in response to its loss of power. The sub-city security head cited above explained the matter as follows:

In 2016, Gondar city experienced a massive uprising against the government, which was started on 12 July 2016, when TPLF-led government [EPRDF] initiated an operation to apprehend Colonel Demeke Zewdu [Welkayte's community identity questions committee member]. The national uprising started in 2016 led to the change of administration in 2018. It was during this transition time that the Qemant-Amhara case erupted and led to major conflicts in districts in Gondar Zones. Then, since 2021 GC during the war between the TPLF and the federal army and its allies, things in Gondar city were very intense mainly due to the Tigrayans [in Gondar], who were spying for the TPLF and these people had their hands on the recent religious conflict in the city.⁴¹

The official went on to explain that these efforts were due to Gondar's strategic position in the Ethiopia-Tigray war, given its proximity to Sudan and historical significance. He also asserted that the political rather than religious nature of the conflict was evidenced by the relative brevity of the violence, and the fact that Christians and Muslims sheltered one another.

Such sentiments were not limited to government officials, but shared widely among study participants. Several informants opined that the TPLF regime had thrived on sowing division among ethnic and religious communities, and used the term 'junta' to describe the TPLF as a de-stabilizing actor in Gondar. In the words of one government official:

In general, the thing happening now is the result of a conspiracy planned and made by the junta [TPLF]. This group, during their time on power, they fabricated conspiracies to divide Muslim and Christian and even to separate husband and wife, parents and children,

40 Deutsche Welle, 'Interfaith tensions'.

41 Interview with sub-city security head, Orthodox, male, age 35.

even through teaching separation but not about living together. This is what we are facing now.⁴²

Similarly, another interlocutor saw the brevity of the conflict as proof of its political nature:

History shows that religious conflicts are extremely violent and destructive, but in the case of Gondar, the real cause of the conflict was not religious, that was why it was relatively easier for the government to maintain control with somewhat less damage.⁴³

There was, however, no agreement on the exact mechanism for this disturbing influence on the April 2022 clashes. Some made direct connections in the form of conspiracy theories, for example claiming that the TPLF ‘gathered unemployed youths and trained them’ for conflict in urban areas,⁴⁴ or noting that the immediate media coverage of the conflict in TPLF outlets suggested the violence had been instigated for propagandist purposes.⁴⁵ Others saw the conflict more as an indirect outcome of TPLF rule and its subsequent demise. One interlocutor, for example, noted the TPLF had a long history of co-opting religious leaders in Gondar, leading to an erosion of their local support and limiting their ability to calm tensions.⁴⁶ Another opined that returning soldiers from the war against the TPLF were misbehaving and giving cause for conflict.⁴⁷

It is worth noting, however, that not all informants blamed the TPLF. One participant pointed the finger at the Prosperity Party, claiming the TPLF was better at managing tensions than the current regime, which in his opinion was rather slow to settle disputes.⁴⁸ Another informant recounted how the TPLF regime had squashed an anti-Protestant Orthodox movement, blaming the recent conflicts on the propensity of religious leaders to involve themselves in politics or use religion for self-enrichment.⁴⁹ Another again offered general musings about unnamed ‘actors’ seeking to ‘destabilize the community to fulfil their political aim’, while still others opted for conspiracy theories involving foreign actors.⁵⁰ This chimed with a tendency to

42 Interview with sub-city security officer and retailer, male, Muslim, age 55.

43 Interview with head of NGO, Pentecostal, male, age 69.

44 Interview with teacher, Orthodox, male, age 52.

45 Interview with government employee, security branch, Orthodox, male, age 35.

46 Interview with lecturer, Orthodox, male, age 31.

47 Interview with government employee, security branch, Orthodox, male, age 42.

48 Interview with Islamic Affairs Supreme Council member, Muslim, male age 38.

49 Interview with pastor, Pentecostal, male, age 55.

50 Interviews with retired teacher, Orthodox, male, age 65; Islamic Affairs Supreme Council member, Muslim, male, age 38; lecturer, Orthodox, male, age 32. In casual conversation, Turkey was often named as an interested party in the conflict.

blame outsiders for Gondar's conflicts, while maintaining the city itself was inherently peaceful. Even so, not all participants took this view, with some directly blaming the city administration for failing to solve the land rights issue. As one Muslim informant stated:

I personally bring up the question of Muslim cemeteries for discussion to government officials in Gondar and beg government officials to provide an immediate solution before it causes violence, but they were unresponsive.⁵¹

Similarly, another Muslim informant claimed that the Gondar government had refused to listen to Muslim demands for justice after the graveyard attack, thereby actively worsening the conflict.⁵² Other informants blamed local politics more indirectly, for example noting that those 'who have political interests in the area are typically the conflict's cause',⁵³ or claiming that 'There were actors who were waiting for this kind of opportunity and they utilize it purposefully for their politics'.⁵⁴ One informant went as far as openly contradicting the notion that the conflict was driven by outsiders, stating:

The security officials were triggered and participated in the conflict, as I told you. They organized and participated in the mob, when they came through a group, the security officers failed, deliberately, to act. I assumed the mobs were outsiders, who are not native Gondar residents. But the local militias and Fanos actively engaged in facilitating their project.⁵⁵

INTER-RELIGIOUS TENSIONS AND INTRA-RELIGIOUS DIVERGENCE

The desire to contrast 'traditionally peaceful Gondar' with the disruptive influence of political actors obscures the inter- and intra-religious tensions also evident in our interviews. One line of argument among Gondar's religious minorities is that they were marginalized and oppressed prior to 1991, after which the EPRDF regime freed them up to express themselves in public and build their own centres of worship. This view was particularly evident among younger Muslim study participants and linked to a desire to overcome past suppression through gaining more places of worship and fuller access to public places in the city, including those traditionally seen as owned by the Orthodox Church and used for Orthodox religious celebrations.

Christian and older Muslim study participants, by contrast, tended to view the previous ethnolinguistic federalist administrative system as one that strove to sustain its power through

51 Interview with Islamic Affairs Supreme Council member, Muslim, male, age 38.

52 Interview with retailer/kebele security officer, Muslim, male, age 36.

53 Interview with head of NGO, Pentecostal, male, age 69.

54 Interview with retired teacher, Orthodox, male, age 65.

55 Interview with merchant, Muslim, male, age 38.

magnifying differences, thereby sowing division and hostility between communities. Among Muslims, such sentiments could be linked to an understanding of Amhara ethnicity and Orthodox religiosity as potentially divisive and oppressive identities, the amplification of which in recent years had harmed national and local unity. Among Christians, such sentiments about the divisiveness of current politics were sometimes linked to a sense of threat, prompted by perceptions of a rising Muslim ritual presence in public and concerns that Gondar's Orthodox character is being diminished by Islamic worship sites.

One particular example of this competition over public space and Gondar's religious character is a dispute about public *iftar* celebrations that took place just prior to the April 2022 conflicts. This was mentioned by ten study participants, most of whom regarded this controversy as being the actual source of the dispute that then erupted into clashes at the sheikh's funeral. Apparently, a group of Muslims planned to host an open-air *iftar* during Ramadan and had asked the city for permission. This plan was controversial, even among Muslims, with some arguing that it was an innovation brought in from abroad and that *iftar* celebrations should be hosted in a mosque.⁵⁶ Some informants, both Christian and Muslim, claimed the plan was to hold these celebrations on or near Meskel (Cross) Square, which would have particularly provocative, given the traditional significance of the square for Orthodox celebrations.

Younger Muslim informants, including those involved in organizing the public *iftar*, claimed, however, that there had never been any intention to hold it on Meskel Square.⁵⁷ Instead, they merely intended to host a public celebration similar to those they had witnessed in other Ethiopian towns, only for the success of their fundraising efforts to spark a social media backlash.⁵⁸ For these young Muslims, the backlash against their public festival provided further confirmation of Muslim intolerance, with one participant going as far as claiming that the April 2022 clashes were covertly instigated by Orthodox Christians in order to prevent the *iftar* celebrations.⁵⁹ Their Muslim opponents, by contrast, regarded it as an unwise and uncalled for initiative. One Muslim interviewee even asserted that it was an act of extremism to plan such *iftar* celebrations in the face of a lack of interest from the surrounding community.⁶⁰

Intra-religious divergence and accusations of extremism also took on an inter-religious dimension among many interviewees. Younger Orthodox Christians tended to associate the conflict with differences within the Muslim community, placing the blame on a growing

56 Muslim opposition mentioned in interviews with Islamic Affairs Supreme Council member, Muslim, male, age 38; retired teacher, Orthodox, male, age 65; private company employee, Muslim, male, age 48.

57 Interviews with merchant, Muslim, male, age 37; merchant, Muslim, male, age 38; merchant, Orthodox, male, age 27.

58 This was also confirmed by a Christian study participant: interview with private company employee, Orthodox, female, age 23.

59 Interview with merchant, Muslim, male, age 38.

60 Interview with private company employee, Muslim, male, age 48.

number of so-called ‘Wahhabi’ Muslims in the city. According to these participants, this new group of Muslims and their teachings rejected the long-standing tradition of peaceful religious coexistence in Gondar city. A young woman who identified herself as Orthodox Christian noted that they were ‘extremists’ and bad for Christians and Muslims alike, because they ‘continue to try to isolate the Muslim community from one another and from other members of community’.⁶¹ This was linked with the overall claim that ‘the Wahhabis are the ones to be blamed for the violence and were using disputes between communities to further their political goal’.⁶² Accordingly, the young woman saw indications of a planned escalation, essentially blaming Muslims themselves for the attacks:

In my understanding, Wahhabis who were originally from Gondar but who moved to Addis Ababa were moving back to Gondar city [a few weeks before the incident] to trigger and aggravate the conflict. When these people moved back to Gondar, the rumour among other residents of Gondar was that they came back with a hidden agenda and the conflict happened at this time.⁶³

Some also asserted that these new, ‘foreign’ developments were disrupting Ethiopian Islam, with an Orthodox lecturer asserting that:

My opinion is that a Greek Orthodox Christian and an Ethiopian Muslim are not comparable to me [meaning: I prefer the Ethiopian Muslim], but today’s conservative Ethiopian Muslims prefer Saudi Muslims to Ethiopian Christians.⁶⁴

Conversely, younger Muslims put the blame on Orthodox religious associations such as *Mahibere Kidusan*, and the divisive teachings of Orthodox religious leaders (including those of *Mahibere Kidusan*). These participants alleged that the new Orthodox Church associations and their religious leaders would like to take Gondar back to a previous era where the Church maintained its power through ‘subjugating other religions, especially Muslims’. While discussing this revived interest in the Orthodox Church, a young Muslim participant observed:

Ethiopia is a country that we all share. There is no newcomer here in Gondar city. However, in the city there is a banner posted [by Orthodox followers] which reads ‘we gave our fathers’ inheritances to strangers’? Who is the stranger? Muslim and Christians were always here. It is sad because I didn’t see anyone [from the administration] who questions

61 Interview with city administration employee, Orthodox, female, age 41.

62 Interview with city administration employee, Orthodox, female, age 41.

63 Interview with city administration employee, Orthodox, female, age 41.

64 Interview with lecturer, Orthodox, male, age 31. A similar assertion of Saudi influence was expressed in an interview with teacher, Orthodox, male, age 52.



the interest of such kind of activities and check what was going on [behind such feelings].⁶⁵

A Muslim high school teacher expressed similar opinions regarding the influence of Orthodox Church teachings on the recent conflict:

According to my observations, before the outbreak of the recent conflict, there was a considerable purposeful grouping [with Orthodox Church believers]. In addition, Church sermons were more about how to defeat [the expansion] of the Muslim community in Gondar.⁶⁶

Some study participants apportioned equal blame to the leaders and members of the ‘Wahhabi movement’ and the *Mahibere Kidusan* as agitators in the recent conflict. Asserting the influence of both groups in the recent conflict, another high school teacher, who identified as Orthodox, stated:

Both parties are to be blamed. On the Orthodox side, it is known as Mahibere Kidusan. I may not see them as serious of a problem as the new Muslim group but still they are catalysing the problem through over-sensitizing the situation. From the Muslims side, it is the new Muslim group and the ustaz in this group who are aggravating the problem.⁶⁷

There were also significant concerns about ‘religiously active’ individuals who use social media platforms to connect with their followers. Participants noted that these people work through national and international networks, which amplify and cascade religious conflict in Ethiopia. This chimed with a sense in some interviews that it was mainly ‘outsiders’ who were behind the Gondar conflicts, both in terms of exacerbating tensions beforehand and being active participants in the violence.

In the context of these rising tensions, the city administration’s failure to solve practical land disputes seemed especially grave. Several community members and local administrative and security officers noted that the government’s reluctance to regulate conflicting demands on public land had contributed to the outbreak of violence. A young Muslim participant observed:

All parties [Muslims and Christians] are arguing about the public space and asked for legal solution to disputed spaces, but there is lack of administrative decision to such disagreements. It is a decision-making problem. The government is confused.⁶⁸

Tragically, such was the case for the burial grounds where the April 2022 conflict first erupted.

65 Interview with retailer/kebele security officer, Muslim, male, age 36.

66 Interview with teacher, Muslim, male, age 60.

67 Interview with teacher, Orthodox, male, age 52.

68 Interview with retailer and kebele security officer, Muslim, male, age 36.

The sub-city security head told us the following:

The root of the problem was the masterplan that demarcates the Muslim burial place and the nearby church. The masterplan was not provided to the community on time. By the way, it has been more than 30 years that Muslims and Christians have been asking for a legal masterplan regarding the contentious place that was claimed by Muslims and Christians. Land is a major issue for religious institutions in Gondar.⁶⁹

It is within the confines of this concrete problem that Gondar's political and religious issues coalesced, leading to the April 2022 clashes. As our interviews demonstrate, tensions had been high for a long time, due both to post-TPLF politics and the war in the north, and an even longer history of rising Christian-Muslim competition over public space, alongside mutual fears of extremism. The failure to clearly define boundaries between religious land or create transparent rules and procedures for the religious use of public space amounts to an absence of de-escalating interventions from the state. Our interviews indicate that there is still much public division in Gondar—both within and between Christianity and Islam—as to the real reasons and instigators behind the conflict, as well regarding how further escalation can be prevented.

69 Interview with sub-city security head, Orthodox, male, age 35.

RELIGION AND PEACEBUILDING

As well as detailing the religious tensions and clashes seen in Gondar city, including their political background, study participants spoke about religious peacebuilding efforts, some of which have been in operation for years. Here, participants identified two main challenges: on the one hand, religious leadership had been weakened by internal divisions and political co-optation, while on the other hand, local initiatives and personal relationships have been severely disrupted by the conflicts, having not been sufficiently protected or nurtured by the authorities. This left participants with a mixed outlook regarding the future of inter-religious relations and peacebuilding in Gondar.

RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP AND POLITICAL CO-OPTATION

Participants agreed religion and religious leaders had a duty to create peace and harmony in communities. This was mentioned by many as a reason behind the many years of peaceful coexistence previously seen between Muslim and Christian communities in the city. Discussing the role of religion in peacebuilding activities in Gondar city, a lecturer at the University of Gondar narrated:

As we have seen in the case of Gondar for years, religion plays a vital role in peacebuilding rather than aggravating conflicts. By the way, it should be noted that religion is not a cause for conflict. Religion is a cause for peacebuilding. In some cases, individuals or religious leaders/groups with political agendas use religion to create and escalate conflict.⁷⁰

Similarly, a retired teacher and Orthodox Christian stated, ‘The two religious groups coexist peacefully in Gondar because their adherents pay attention to their religious leaders and the peace teaching of these institutions’.⁷¹ At the same time, participants noted an erosion of religious leadership in Gondar that had made such conflicts possible. Some informants pointed to a general decline in respect for religious authority, while others noted that ‘due to their involvement in various political actions, these religious fathers have recently started to lose such respect from their followers’.⁷² This accords with a view frequently expressed in interviews linking the clashes with youth with a failure to dampen their ‘emotionalism’ and address their grievances. Assertions were also made that religious leaders themselves had fanned the flames of conflict through their preaching. Moreover, some pointed to internal divisions as a cause of weakened leadership, with one Muslim religious leader stating:

70 Interview with lecturer, Orthodox, male, age 32.

71 Interview with retired teacher, Orthodox, male, age 65.

72 Interview with retired teacher, Orthodox, male, age 65.

In the case of Islam, now we have no leader because we do not accept the newcomers [the new president and other members of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council] since they represent Wahhabism rather than us.⁷³

A Protestant pastor also pointed a decline in leadership:

Okay, to be honest, we do not perform to the standards that are expected from us as religious leaders, and we are still expected to do a lot to maintain the safety and security of the community.⁷⁴

One particularly important factor in the erosion of religious authority has been government capture of inter-religious dialogue. According to participants, there had been a peacebuilding initiative in Gondar city in the form of an inter-religious committee established by representatives selected from different religions and community members. A well-briefed Protestant leader noted that this had been superseded by the government's creation of the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRC):

As I mentioned before, prior to the government's action in establishing the inter-religious council in Gondar, we [religious leaders in city] had already created our own religious council, which was run by representatives chosen from every religious institution in Gondar city. This council did its part to keep the town peaceful for a very long time. But when the government established a new religious council, ours had to be combined with this new one. Unfortunately, the new council is weaker and has been unable to resolve conflicts. This is because there are people in this council who are not genuinely doing their work. Plus, most of the representatives in the new council are religious leaders who are at the very top position in their religion, which makes them highly disconnected from common people and the realities at the ground. So, in my view, the IRC must be reorganized and include all stakeholders at different levels so that it can be as effective as our older committee.⁷⁵

On the whole, participants were discontented about the national and regional IRC and its dialogue initiatives, with many expressing concerns that some religious leaders and IRC members had been co-opted by the government. For these participants, such leaders appeared more concerned with pleasing the government than assisting communities in Gondar city. Here, a Muslim religious leader who also holds a position in the Muslim Council of Gondar city echoed the comments of the Protestant leader above:

The religious council [IRC] needs to be reorganized. In my opinion, it is not operating

73 Interview with Islamic Affairs Supreme Council member, Muslim, male, age 38.

74 Interview with pastor, Pentecostal, male, age 55.

75 Interview with head of NGO, Pentecostal, male, age 69.

effectively. Except for Haji Mufti [the then President of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council] and the Weldiya bishop Abune Ermias [the then Archbishop of the North Wollo Diocese of Ethiopian Orthodox Church] who travelled to Gondar and attempted to engage in public dialogues after the conflict, none of the other representatives in this council were successful in fostering peace. We anticipate a rearrangement of the council because most members of the council are engaged in political activity.⁷⁶

Similarly, a University of Gondar lecturer and Orthodox Church follower stated:

I am aware of the activities of members of the inter-religious council in Gondar city and those involved in inter-religious dialogues, but neither is particularly effective in resolving conflicts. The majority of the people who are members of this organization are government representatives, and rather than focusing on maintaining peace in the country, they have political agendas.⁷⁷

A few days after the April 2022 clashes, the IRC and government representatives ran a peacebuilding and inter-religious dialogue forum. Both Muslim and Orthodox Christian religious leaders, including Haji Mufti and Abune Ermias, came to Gondar city and engaged in community dialogues and peacebuilding activities. Participants spoke highly of these two religious leaders and their activities in Ethiopia generally, as well as in Gondar city. Haji Mufti was noted by some as having been actively engaged in peacebuilding efforts following inter-communal (ethnic/religious or both) violence in Ethiopia over the last four years, although others viewed this as a kind of political co-optation. Similarly, Abune Ermias was reported to have made vital contributions to coexistence and cooperation activities between Muslim and Christian communities during the conflict between TPLF forces and federal troops and their allies in Weldiya city in late 2021.

LOCAL INITIATIVES AND RELATIONSHIPS

The above-mentioned April 2022 post-conflict intervention also sparked a local initiative by Orthodox Christians to collect money from the community (mainly from Orthodox followers) to rebuild the damaged mosques and burned Muslim shops. Discussing the importance of religious leaders in peacebuilding and particularly recent peacebuilding efforts in Gondar city, an Orthodox woman stated:

Religious leaders can play a vital role in limiting disputes, and as we have seen recently, religious leaders [in the Orthodox Church] joined an initiative to collect money to provide for the [Muslim] victims of the recent conflict. In my opinion, the government cannot

76 Interview with Islamic Affairs Supreme Council member, Muslim, male, age 38.

77 Interview with lecturer, Orthodox, male, age 32.

solve the problem if it does not include religious leaders in its peace-keeping efforts.⁷⁸

Unfortunately, this peace initiative did not get nearly as much coverage in the news and social media as the reports of conflict. Furthermore, it did not last very long, mainly due to the newly revived war between TPLF forces and the federal government and its allies around mid-2022. This shifted attention away from the already weakened peacebuilding efforts and intra-religious dialogue that had been initiated by the IRC in collaboration with regional and local security and administrative leaders.

Drawing on these experiences, there was general agreement among participants that inter-religious peacebuilding efforts and dialogue in Gondar city would be more productive if initiated by religious leaders (both Muslim and Orthodox Christian) who are highly respected and accepted by followers of both religions, rather than led by politicians and administrators. Participants also consistently highlighted the value of locally organized inter-religious dialogues and initiatives.

This chimed with experiences of the recent conflict itself, with participants citing instances of neighbourly help between Christians and Muslims as being indicative of a peace-loving majority in town. A young Orthodox Christian observed:

During the conflict, there were people [who were Orthodox] who protected Muslims and their property but there were also others who attacked Muslims and damaged their properties. Muslims have still maintained their relationships with those who protected them but may have developed uneasy feelings and relations with those who attacked them.⁷⁹

A Muslim participant, who had lost two brothers during the conflict, one killed in Gondar and one in a town outside of Gondar, made a similar statement, albeit significantly qualified at the end:

On the other side, there were people who strived to protect us. At the time of the conflict, my Christian neighbours accompanied me and helped me hire a car so I could go to the funeral ceremony of my brother outside of Gondar. In that difficult time, Christian friends stood by my side and went with me for the funeral outside of the city. What can I say in this context – on the one hand my brothers were killed, and on the other hand they stood with me and condemned the attack.⁸⁰

This highlights the disruptive damage caused by the recent conflicts. Despite a general sense of

78 Interview with civil service employee, Orthodox, female, age 41.

79 Interview with government employee, Orthodox, male, age 40.

80 Interview with private company employee, Muslim, male, age 48.

peaceful inter-religious relations in Gondar, the attacks created a feeling of uncertainty about the religious other. When recounting their management of inter-religious relations before the conflict, participants tended to describe a mode of respectful distance. People knew one another and celebrated feasts together, but would refrain from bringing up religious matters and take pains to avoid any impression of interfering in another religion's affairs. The conflict damaged these convivial relations. In some cases, it was enough for people to reassure each other of their continued support by visiting one another, discussing the violence, listening to each other's grievances and confirming their solidarity. In other cases, more extensive efforts were necessary and it took time for previous relations to resume and trust to be regained. In at least one reported instance, the damage has not yet been reversed. These examples show the importance of grassroots efforts in post-conflict peacebuilding and illustrate why people generally expect fairly little from governmental dialogue initiatives.⁸¹

Where people did voice expectations of the government, it usually took the form of demanding better government conduct in administration and security. While discussing his vision for how intra-religious unity and harmony can be restored, a senior high school teacher noted:

I believe that the government should refrain from intervening. Questions should be answered wisely. For example, if someone wants to build a mosque near a historical church, officials should weigh in several factors before making a decision. The government stated that they are working hard to reduce conflict, but the outcome of their work has been the opposite.⁸²

Similarly, participants voiced concerns that although certain instigators and their networks were well known to communities and the government security structure, no supervisory action or intervention had been taken by the federal or local administration. This even included instances where divisive rhetoric directly led to conflict. Some participants regarded the federal and regional security structures as enabling these people, rather than making use of their regulatory and protective capacities to help restore productive religious encounters.

Most agreed that despite local and national government having the capacity to foresee conflicts, it was only after they had erupted that authorities engaged in conflict resolution and peacebuilding activities. A civil servant expressed this sentiment thus:

I strongly believe that the administration has the power to stop conflicts. The government has the authority and the power to end dispute of such natures, which is why it was resolved in just three days after the conflict, but it was done when the government wants

81 See also John Dulin, "My Fast is Better Than Your Fast": Concealing Interreligious Evaluations and Discerning Respectful Others in Gondar, Ethiopia', *Ethnos* 87/3 (2022).

82 Interview with teacher, Orthodox, male, age 52.

to do it and that is the problem.⁸³

Participants that did feel the government had a role to play in inter-religious dialogue mostly framed it in terms of the opportunity to better anticipate and prevent conflict by learning from religious communities. A Muslim senior high school teacher asserted:

If they put their minds into it, I have no doubt that the government will be able to find a solution to the problem. For instance, the government may include influential religious leaders within churches and get advices from them about the problem that we are living right now. Similarly, the government can engage in conversation with the respected Muslim ustaz and religious teachers, and through these conversations, they would be able to mitigate the problems.⁸⁴

EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Despite participants overall sharing the sentiment that Gondar is a peaceful city, they had very different responses when it came to questions concerning their hopes for the future of Gondar. While some informants were optimistic when discussing their hopes and concerns for future inter-religious relations in Gondar city, others were more pessimistic. Almost all detailed important issues that need to be addressed if Gondar is to return to its previous peaceful inter-religious existence. Moreover, they expressed their desire to cultivate lasting feelings of coexistence in order to achieve improved inter-religious relations. Most noted that all responsible stakeholders – religious institutions and their leaders, community members, politicians, and national and local government administrative and security leaders—should play a role in nurturing such sentiments. They also wished for less political intervention in religious institutions, national and regional inter-religious councils, and inter-religious peacebuilding efforts (including inter-religious dialogue).

For most participants, sustainable peacebuilding activities can only be successful when respected religious leaders, elders and community members are involved in initiatives that originate from communities rather than the government. Inter-religious peacebuilding dialogues are therefore more likely to be effective if run by respected religious leaders and community members than government administrative and security officials and the city's incumbent IRC. Participants stressed the importance of utilizing already available local peace-mediation and peacebuilding mechanisms, as well as sermons and moral instruction in mosques and churches regarding improved coexistence.

83 Interview with civil service employee, Orthodox, female, age 41.

84 Interview with teacher, Muslim, male, age 60.

CONCLUSIONS

Gondar city is known for the centuries' old coexistence and exemplary inter-religious encounters between its Muslim and Orthodox Tewahedo Christian community members. These inter-religious relations have, however, deteriorated over recent decades, with participants indicating a number of causes. Some faulted the political apparatus and administrative system since 1991 for increased inter-religious competition. Others saw intra-religious differences as responsible for bringing more radical movements to the fore. Competition over land and public space between Muslims and Orthodox Christians was noted as the immediate issue that led to the April 2022 conflict.

When asked specifically about the April 2022 conflict, participants opted not to categorize it merely as religious, instead identifying the same cluster of underlying causes. These narratives provide important context for better understanding how the conflict arose. At the same time, they reveal how perceptions of the conflict continue to differ widely, not just with regard to causes but even in identifying the physical damage done. This divergence in perspectives indicates the persistence of division in Gondar city, which needs to be addressed through post-conflict peacebuilding initiatives.

There was a widely shared sentiment that Ethiopia's wider politics have proven detrimental to inter-religious relations in Gondar. Many participants considered the past three decades of ethnolinguistic federalism as having amplified ethnic and religious differences, providing an initiating factor for inter-communal conflicts. At the same time, a pattern of community grievances and competition informed many interviews. Muslims shared sentiments of having been repressed by previous regimes and needing to fight for more equitable access to public space. On the Orthodox side, the increased visibility of mosques and Muslim celebrations was seen as representing new entitlements aimed at overthrowing their long-standing majority.

In addition, both religious communities tended to blame each other for the conflict. Orthodox Christians associated the conflict with intra-religious differences within the Muslim community, blaming increasing public tensions on the rise of 'Wahhabism'. Conversely, Muslims placed the blame on Orthodox associations such as Mahibere Kidusan and the divisive teachings of their religious leaders.

The government was generally not regarded as helpful. Long-standing pressures on land had gone unresolved by the authorities, ultimately leading to the April 2022 violence. Nothing had been done to regulate or curb inflammatory preaching, despite the instigators being known. When conflict erupted, security forces were unprepared for and unable to prevent the outbreak. With few exceptions, government dialogue initiatives bore little fruit, as they sought to co-opt rather than facilitate already existing local dialogue initiatives.

Nonetheless, our study identified four important resources for improving and restoring peaceful inter-religious relations in Gondar city. Firstly, a traditional sentiment of peaceful coexistence prevails in both the city's Orthodox and Muslim communities. While expectations about the future are mixed, none of the participants accepted inter-religious conflict as the norm – rather, many had personal stories to tell of convivial relations with the religious other.

Secondly, participants lauded indigenous conflict resolution processes that had proven effective during recent inter-communal conflict between Qemant and Amhara community members in West and Central Gondar zones, with hope expressed that these can be used to improve inter-religious relations in Gondar city.

Thirdly, participants acknowledged the potential for genuine inter-religious peacebuilding and dialogue forums. These need, however, to be run by respected religious leaders and elders, and rather than imposed by government should be rooted locally in already existing religious forums, as well as sermons and moral instruction provided in mosques and churches.

Fourthly, there is a different role government can play: good administration aimed at conflict prevention. This includes identifying and resolving tension points around land, providing transparent and equitable regulations for public religious expression, and preventing conflict by identifying and reining in instigators. Following conflict, government also needs to step up efforts to establish the facts, find and prosecute perpetrators, and help victims recover from emotional, psychological and financial losses.

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