



## CONFLICT TRENDS REPORT / OCTOBER 2023

# AMHARA REGION

BY ATRSAW NECHO\*

*This Conflict Trends Report presents a comprehensive analysis of conflict patterns in the Amhara Region in the period April 2022 to September 2023. While focusing on conflicts in northern Amhara, it also provides an overview of other conflicts in the region, such as in the Oromo Special Zone, outlines the actors in these conflicts, and presents a chronological account of significant events in the period.*

## SUMMARY

- During this period, the Amhara region was affected by six distinct theatres of conflict which have fluctuated in intensity over time. There are several key drivers of conflict in the region, including competing identity-based movements; territorial disputes; political realignments; and the country's ongoing economic woes. In addition, structural factors, such as ethnic federalism and the region's complex security landscape are a key influence on the nature and prevalence of conflict there.
- The contest for control over the disputed areas of Wolqayt-Tsegede, Raya and Telemt between the Amhara and Tigray regions—all now under Amhara control—remained active. Due to the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) between the TPLF and the federal government, there was no active fighting during this period, but the disputed areas remain the major point of contention between the two regions.
- The disbanding of the Amhara Special Forces (ASF)—part of a nationwide, albeit unevenly implemented, reorganization of regional forces—in April 2023 provoked armed resistance in the Amhara region. Amhara nationalists considered it a conspiracy to reduce their forces' influence, particularly in the context of the CoHA. This compounded earlier attempts to bring the Fano into the regular security structures that had led to skirmishes with the military in May and June 2022.
- The Amhara Fano insurgency followed the disbanding of regional special forces with significant portions of the ASF defecting and joining the Fano to fight the ENDF, which made substantial deployments to disarm Fanos in the region. This led to a major conflict between Amhara and federal forces in July and early August 2023, including in urban centres such as Bahir Dar, Gondar, Woldia, Shewa Robit, Lalibela and Debre Birhan.
- The Qimant conflict grew out of demands by the Qimant ethnic group for self-administration. The Qimant armed group has been seeking to establish a Qimant Special Zone incorporating 72 kebeles, while the regional administration argues that this was addressed through the establishment of the Qimant Special Zone made up of 69 kebeles. The resulting resentment within the Qimant community has made the situation precarious and the Qimant armed group allied itself with the TPLF to fight federal forces and the ASF.
- Major violence in the Oromo Special Zone and North Shewa occurred in late January 2023. Various actors were involved, and there were numerous casualties and hundreds of thousands of people displaced, posing a significant threat to Amhara-Oromo ties within and outside the ruling Prosperity Party (PP).
- The Ethio-Sudan border dispute mainly concerns the disputed Al-Fashaga triangle, also known as the *Mezega* area in Ethiopia. The Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and Amhara local militias engaged in armed conflict in the area, particularly in late April and June of 2022, when Amhara forces tried to reclaim the territory controlled by the Sudanese forces while the ENDF was mobilized to fight the TPLF. Despite de-escalation of tension between the two countries, the border dispute has yet to be resolved.

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## DRIVERS OF CONFLICT IN THE AMHARA REGION

The conflicts in the Amhara region can be categorized into inter- and intra-regional conflicts. Their drivers vary and can be multi-layered and interlinked: inter-Amhara conflicts, for example, are linked to intra-regional conflicts or their drivers.

### Competing Identity-Based Movements

The Amhara region, like other regions in Ethiopia, has experienced conflicts driven by competing identity-based movements. Ethnic and religious aspirations have played a significant role in driving tensions and conflicts, as different groups such as the Agew, Qimant, and Oromo living in Oromo Special Zone of the Amhara region seek recognition, representation, and autonomy. Moreover, the lack of representation and massacres that the Amharas living outside the Amhara region have often faced has also contributed to political resentment across the region.

### Territorial Disputes

At times related to contentious identity-based movements, but a key driver in its own right, is territorial disputes. Land and resource ownership and allocation have been contentious issues in the Amhara region. Disputes over territories and boundaries have sparked conflicts, with various groups vying for control and asserting their claims. The question of territory also applies to the Wolqayt-T(s)egege conflict where Amhara and Tigray identities are at loggerheads. Similarly, the Ethio-Sudan border skirmishes are another instance of territory-driven conflict.

### Political Power Realignment

Competing national and ethnic aspirations often interact with continuities and change in the Ethiopian state, where ethnic groups are demanding more representation centrally at the same time as seeking autonomy within their region. For example, Amhara nationalists believe they are being sidelined from central power and also feel their autonomy within the region is being eroded. They believe the PP is dominated by Oromo political elites who want to impose their will, including in the Amhara region. Marginalization of Amhara representatives from peace processes, such as with the TPLF and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), has created grievances and tensions.

A related factor is the quest for a new political settlement in, and redefinition of, the Ethiopian state. The remaking of Ethiopia's social contract is portrayed as reducing the north's cultural and political

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dominance and giving the so-called ‘Greater South’ more representation. Lastly, power struggles at the regional level are another factor driving conflicts on the ground. Fragmentation among fighting parties is linked to the power struggle between the different provincialized identities within the Amhara region.

### *Economic Woes*

Economic challenges, including the cost of living crisis across the country and the fertilizer and seed crisis in the region, have added to discontent and conflict. In this regard, insufficient allocation of resources has exacerbated economic grievances and fueled tensions among different groups.

## **STRUCTURAL FACTORS**

The conflicts in the Amhara region occur against the backdrop of some crucial structural factors – ethnic federalism and the complex security landscape currently evident in Ethiopia – which are also evident in other conflict contexts in Ethiopia.

### *Ethnic Federalism*

The structural background of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia has played a role in recent conflicts. Balancing popular consent, language, administrative feasibility, and historical factors in the implementation of ethnic federalism has been a challenge, which has contributed to tensions and conflicts, such as in the Wolqayt-T(s)egede, Qimant, and Oromo Special Zone areas.

### *Complex Security Landscape*

The Amhara region has a complex security landscape with the proliferation of state and non-state armed groups. State armed groups operating in the region and engaged in conflicts include the ENDF, the Federal Police, Amhara Police, Amhara local militia, and Amhara Anti-Riot Force. On the other hand, the non-state armed groups operating in the region are mainly decentralized entities using the umbrella term ‘Fano’. Differentiating between these groups, such as the non-state ‘Amhara Fano militia’ and the state-affiliated ‘Amhara militia,’ is difficult but crucial to understand the dynamics of the conflicts. Clarifying the distinctions between groups like the Amhara Popular Front led by Eskinder Nega and the Amhara Popular Force led by Zemene Kassie, both non-state armed entities in the region, is also essential to avoid confusion and properly understand the conflict dynamics.

## **TIMELINE OF KEY CONFLICTS IN THE AMHARA REGION**

**Table 1: Timeline of conflict trends in Amhara region, April 2022-August 2023**

### **2022**

#### **APRIL**

*11-16:* Intermittent small-scale clashes between ENDF/Amhara Forces and TPLF fighters in Beraket and Legudi, 15-20 km from Maykadra town.

#### **MAY**

*Mid-May:* The Amhara regional government launches what it calls a ‘law-enforcement operation’ targeting Amhara Fano militias, activists, and journalists in the region.

#### **MID-MAY TO JULY**

The ASF and Amhara Fano militias engage in skirmishes as part of the ‘law-enforcement operation’ in the region.

*Late May:* Intermittent small-scale clash between Tigray and Amhara forces are reported in the Wolqayt woreda.

*Late May:* Over 11,000 IDPs who were displaced due to the Amhara-Qimant conflict return to their homes in Chilga woreda, Central Gondar Zone.

**JUNE**

14: Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announces the possibility of direct peace talks between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF.

23-25: A clash between ENDF/Amhara forces in the Kobo woreda of the North Wollo Zone, resulting in 10 fatalities, is reported.

*Late:* Seven Sudanese soldiers and one Amhara Fano militia are killed in a clash between the SAF and Amhara Fano militias in West Armachiho woreda.

**JULY**

5: Ethiopian and Sudanese leaders meet in Nairobi to ease the tension between the two countries.

9: A Qimant ethnic armed group reportedly attacks Shumet Mendoka village of Metema woreda, resulting in six deaths and four injuries.

**AUGUST**

20-21: Tigrayan and ENDF/Amhara forces reportedly clash in the Bereket, Legudi, and Mechache areas of Wolqayt-T(s)egede.

*Late:* The war between the TDF and ENDF/Amhara forces reignites.

**NOVEMBER**

3: The TPLF and Ethiopia's federal government sign a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities (CoHA) agreement in Pretoria, South Africa.

12: ENDF and Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) leaders sign the Nairobi Declaration, outlining a schedule for the surrender of heavy weapons by Tigrayan forces.

**2023****JANUARY**

*Mid:* Amhara Special Forces members stationed in Shire, Tigray, withdraw as per the Pretoria CoHA.

*Late:* Violence erupts in the Amhara region's Oromo Special Zone and North Shewa Zone, killing nearly 100 civilians and displacing thousands.

**APRIL**

6: The Ethiopian federal government announces its decision to dismantle the Regional Special Forces.

*Early:* Protests erupt in the Amhara region following the announcement of the disbanding of the Regional Special Forces.

15: In Sudan, fighting erupts between the SAF and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF); Ethiopia maintains a neutral stance.

28: Girma Yeshitela, leader of the Amhara region chapter of the ruling PP, is assassinated in the North Shewa Zone of Amhara region.

**APRIL - EARLY AUGUST**

Amhara Fano militias and ENDF backed by regional police forces are reportedly involved in armed conflicts across the region.

**MAY**

20: Eskinder Nega announces the formation of the Amhara Popular Front (APF).

**JUNE**

11: Officials from Tigray's interim administration travel to Bahir Dar for talks with the leadership of the Amhara region.

**SEPTEMBER**

4: A state of emergency is declared in the Amhara region following a formal request from the region for federal intervention.

## CONFLICT DYNAMICS AND ACTORS

The dynamics of conflicts in the Amhara region vary depending on the parties involved, the location and type of conflicts. There are numerous armed actors involved, including the ENDF, ASF, Amhara militias, TDF, SAF, and the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF). Non-state actors such as the Amhara Fano militias, Qimant ethnic armed group, and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), which the regional and federal governments describe as Oromo Liberation Front-*Shene*, are also among the players in the conflicts in the Amhara region.

**Table 2: Conflict Parties Involved in the Northern Amhara Conflicts**

CONFLICT	CONFLICT PARTIES			
Battle to control Wolqayt-T(s)egede	ENDF	ASF and Amhara militias, divisions controlled by Amhara regional state government Amhara Fano militias, a self-organized militia force	TDF, loyal to the TPLF	EDF
Border dispute between Ethiopia and Sudan	ENDF	ASF and Amhara militias, Amhara Fano militias	SAF	
Amhara-Qimant conflict	ASF	Qimant ethnic armed group		
Clash between Amhara Fano militias and government forces	ENDF	ASF and Amhara militias, and Police Force	Amhara Fano militias	
Oromo Special Zone Conflict	OLA	ASF Amhara Fano militias		

### THE BATTLE FOR WOLQAYT-T(S)EGEDE

Wolqayt-T(s)egede has been contested for decades, but the de facto annexation of administrative units in the fertile lands of Wolqayt-T(s)egede by Amhara forces has renewed tensions in the area. The war in northern Ethiopia paved the way for emboldened Amhara forces to retake control of the area in November 2020. Although these areas were controlled by Amhara forces during the early phase of the northern Ethiopia war, Amhara nationalists argue that the TPLF demarcated the areas when it took control of the country in the early 1990s despite the Amharas' claims of historical ownership. Tigrayans also claim historical ownership of the area and allude to linguistic ties they have with the people.

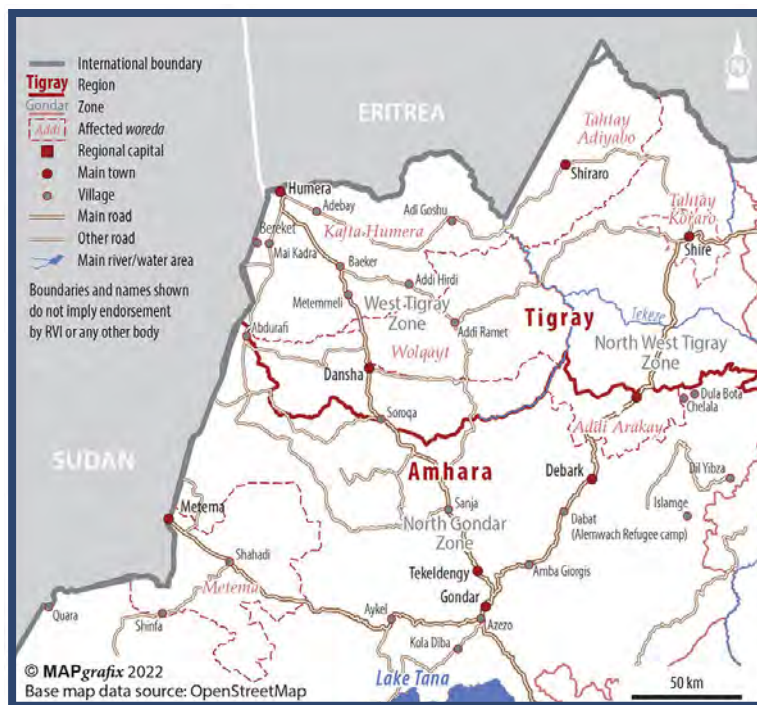
While the war with the TPLF ended with the Pretoria peace deal, the dispute over Wolqayt-T(s)egede presents a complex challenge to the peace process, as the Amhara believe the CoHA deal excluded them and they fear it would hand over these areas to Tigray. There is a formidable divide between the Amhara and Tigray nationalists in the Wolqayt-T(s)egede area. The Amhara side wants to maintain the de facto administration, while the Tigray side demand Amhara forces withdraw. Given the animosity between the TPLF and the Eritrean government, the only way Tigrayan forces could gain access to international routes was through Wolqayt-T(s)egede. TPLF therefore fought to take control of and to break the siege on the region, (which the UN termed a de facto humanitarian blockade<sup>1</sup>). The federal government stopped the TPLF taking control of Wolqayt-T(s)egede to prevent a possible inflow of fighters and weapons for Tigrayan forces.

<sup>1</sup> 'Humanitarian Catastrophe Unfolding before Our Eyes, Secretary-General Tells Security Council, Warning Ethiopia's Youth Will Be Ultimate Casualties', United Nations, 26 August 2021, <https://press.un.org/en/2021/sgsm20866.doc.htm>.



Conflict in Wolqayt-T(s)egede appeared inevitable, given the war mobilization, aggressive rhetoric, and frequent skirmishes in the Maigaba, Bereket, Legudi, and Mechache areas (Wolkayt-T(s)egede), Gidan and Raya Kobo woredas (North Wollo), and the Ethio-Eritrea border. When fighting resumed in northern Ethiopia at the end of August 2022, after a five-month ‘humanitarian truce’, Tigrayan forces engaged ENDF/Amhara forces from the direction of Hamdayit-Sudan<sup>2</sup> and North West Tigray Zone with the intention of controlling Wolqayt-T(s)egede. Eritrea joined the battle along the Ethio-Eritrea border in early September 2022, in collaboration with federal forces. Tigrayan fighters aimed to drive Amhara forces from Wolqayt-T(s)egede by controlling the southern front in the eastern region

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of Amhara. In mid-September the allied federal forces regained control of areas overtaken by the TPLF and in October advanced into Tigray region, ultimately leading the Tigrayan forces to pressure the federal government for a ceasefire.

The CoHA and the Nairobi declaration outlined a timeline for the surrender of heavy weapons, which will coincide with the withdrawal of foreign and non-ENDF (Eritrean and Amhara) forces from the Tigray region. The CoHA and political reconciliation between the TPLF and the federal government have raised concerns among Amhara nationalists who felt excluded from the Pretoria peace talks and who remained worried about the future of the disputed territories of Wolqayt-T(s)egede, Telemt, and Raya.

Amid calls to fully implement the Pretoria peace deal and reinstate internally displaced people (IDPs) from the contested areas, a delegation led by the President of the Interim Regional Administration of Tigray, Getachew Reda, visited Bahir Dar for talks with the Amhara region leadership including the former president, Yilkal Kefale. The visit aimed to improve relations between the regions. At the meeting, the Amhara regional president reportedly said that internally displaced Tigrayans can return to their homes in disputed areas, but that a strict verification process should be implemented to ensure only genuine IDPs can do so. Meanwhile, IDPs in Tigray demonstrated, demanding to return to their homes, while counter-demonstrations by the Amhara population in the contested areas stressed that the annexed areas are Amhara territories.

The Wolqayt-T(s)egede Amhara Identity Restoration Committee met with Amhara regional government

2 ‘Ex-UN Peacekeepers Battle for Control of Key Ethiopian Town,’ Bloomberg, 2 September 2022, [https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-02/ex-un-peacekeepers-battle-for-control-of-key-ethiopian-town?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=socialflow-twitter-africa&utm\\_content=africa&utm\\_source=twitter&utm\\_campaign=socialflow-organic#x-j4y7vzkg](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-02/ex-un-peacekeepers-battle-for-control-of-key-ethiopian-town?utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=socialflow-twitter-africa&utm_content=africa&utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=socialflow-organic#x-j4y7vzkg).

officials in November 2022 to protest any constitutional approach to resolving the disputes in the area. A conference in Gondar city presided over by senior authorities of the Wolqayt-T(s)egede Setit-Humera Zone, on 23 February 2023, confirmed that the future of Wolqayt-T(s)egede should not be decided by a referendum. In a parliamentary address in November 2022, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said that issues in contested areas will be resolved through legal procedures and dialogue.<sup>3</sup> Amhara nationalists believe Abiy wants to hand over the area to Tigray and that he would use the demobilized Tigrayan forces—who are yet to be fully disarmed—against them.

Attempts to resolve the issue through constitutional means has proved to be difficult as armed Amhara nationalists see themselves as disadvantaged by the process. They oppose a referendum because they believe there are a huge number of Tigrayans in the contested areas as a result of TPLF's imposed demographic reengineering over the past three decades.<sup>4</sup> A referendum would require the return of these Tigrayan IDPs and a return to the status quo ante—which is what TPLF is demanding. Amhara nationalists, on the other hand, argue that the Amhara were forcefully displaced over the past decades.

### DISBANDING OF THE AMHARA SPECIAL FORCES

In early April 2023 the federal government decided to disband regional special forces across Ethiopia including the ASF.<sup>5</sup> It was stated that their members would be integrated into the other federal and/or regional security structures based on their interests.<sup>6</sup> Following this announcement, demonstrations involving armed Amhara Fano militias and a portion of the ASF erupted in the Amhara region, challenging the regional administration's support for the dissolution of the ASF. There were minor clashes and stand-offs between the ASF and Amhara Fano militias against the ENDF in Kobo, Woldiya, Sekota, Debre Birhan, Ataye towns, and other areas of the Oromo Special Zone. The unrest quickly abated following intervention by elders in time for the Orthodox Easter holiday on 8 April 2023.

The Amhara regional government endorsed the federal government's decision to disband the special forces by urging ASF members to return to their barracks and engage in discussions with their government.<sup>7</sup> The National Movement of Amhara party (NAMA) and other nationalist opposition groups took the opportunity to present themselves as a viable alternative to the ruling Amhara Prosperity Party (APP) by criticizing the decision to disband the ASF.<sup>8</sup> The APP acknowledged the need for clearer communication about the process, referring to it as 'reorganization' rather than a 'disbandment', but

3 ጠ/ሚ 0ቢዴ “የወሰን ውዝግብ ያለባቸው አካባቢዎች በህግ አግባብና በምክክር ይፈታሉ” አሉ (PM Abiy said, “Areas with boundary disputes will be resolved through legal process and consultation”), 15 November 2022, <https://am.al-ain.com/article/pm-abiy-said-boundary-disputes-will-be-resolved-through-legal-process-and-consultation>.

4 Wosenyelew Tedla & Moges, Kelklie, ‘Welkait, Ethiopia: Geo Strategic importance and the Consequential Annexation by TPLF’, Horn Africa Insight, 2 August 2021, <https://www.hornofafricainsight.org/post/welkait-ethiopia-geo-strategic-importance-and-the-consequential-annexation-by-tplf>.

5 The federal government's arguments for disbanding the special forces include: their role in exacerbating conflicts; to create a centralized and stronger ENDF; and the view that regional special forces are unconstitutional.

6 ‘Analysis: Ethiopia begins “practical activities” to dissolve, reenlist controversial regional special forces, cautions actors not to impeded move’, *Addis Standard*, 7 April 2023, <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-ethiopia-begins-practical-activities-to-dissolve-reenlist-controversial-regional-special-forces-cautions-actors-not-to-impeded-move/>.

7 ‘Amhara state gov calls on regional special forces to “return” to respective camps, remain calm’, *Addis Standard*, 7 April 2023, <https://addisstandard.com/news-amhara-state-gov-calls-on-regional-special-forces-to-return-to-respective-camps-remain-calm/>.

8 የአማራ ብሔራዊ ንቅናቄ / National Movement of Amhara, Facebook page, 6 April 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/Chil-ga-communication-767037400043691>.

blamed social media activists for spreading misinformation.<sup>9</sup>

The ASF's dissolution raised concerns among Amhara nationalists that their interests might be ignored, especially given the situation in the disputed territories.<sup>10</sup> They interpreted the decision as a strategy by the Oromo-dominated federal government to undermine the Amhara region's political and military strength.<sup>11</sup> They further argue that the plan to disband special forces was not uniformly implemented across the country but focused specifically on the ASF.

The federal government's decision came amidst political differences and divisions between the PP's Amhara and Oromia chapters, as well as between the broader Oromia and Amhara political establishments. These divisions have led to controversies involving: the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC); the hoisting of the flag of Oromia region and singing of the regional anthem in schools in Addis Ababa; the establishment of Shaggar City in the Oromia region which the Amhara perceived as a move to exclude them from Addis Ababa and drive non-Oromo people from Oromia; and the widening polarization over the politicization of public and religious events including the commemoration of the Adwa victory and historical figures.

Some also saw the disbanding of the ASF as linked with the contested borderlines between the Amhara and Tigray regions including Wolqayt-T(s)egede, Telemt, and Raya. Citing the number of Oromo figures in the military's top leadership and command structure, the Amhara opposition and diaspora see the ENDF as an Oromo domain, asserting that implementation of the current plans would weaken the Amhara while consolidating Oromo control of the national security sector.

Reports of assassinations of zonal and district level officials and party members in the Amhara region added to the controversies following the disbanding of the ASF. The notable assassination of the head of the Amhara PP, Girma Yeshitela, while on duty in the North Shewa Zone of the Amhara region, escalated tensions between Amhara nationalists and the federal government. The government summoned the Joint Security and Intelligence Task Force and initiated a new law enforcement operation in the Amhara region, targeting what it called extremist forces.<sup>12</sup> The Amhara regional communication bureau attributed Girma's assassination to the East (Misrak) Amhara Fano militia, led by Mihret Wodajo, aka 'Merrie'. Forty-seven individuals purportedly linked to the incident were arrested<sup>13</sup>, including prominent Amhara nationalists, journalists, and members of the Amhara Fano militia. The upheavals following the disbanding of the special forces fed into the late June 2023 clashes between armed groups in the Amhara region, including defected ASF members and the federal government.

The Amhara Fano group has been instrumental in the conflicts that have ensued in the Amhara region, engaging federal forces on several fronts. The militia became stronger after the 2016-18 Amhara

9 'PP head in Amhara region says regional officials' failure led to ongoing violence over decision to "reorganize" special forces', *Addis Standard*, 12 April 2023, <https://addisstandard.com/news-pp-head-in-amhara-region-says-regional-officials-failure-led-to-ongoing-violence-over-decision-to-reorganise-special-forces/>.

10 'Ethiopian plan to disarm regional forces sparks protests in Amhara', *Washington Post*, 10 April 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/10/ethiopia-disarm-amhara-tigray/>.

11 Hone Mandefro, 'how years of tension in Amhara boiled to the surface', *African Arguments*, August 4, 2023, <https://africanarguments.org/2023/08/how-years-of-tension-in-amhara-boiled-to-the-surface/>.

12 'Joint Task Force says taking "decisive measures" against "extremist forces" in Amhara region in wake of official's killing', *Addis Standard*, 28 April 2023, <https://addisstandard.com/news-joint-task-force-says-taking-decisive-measures-against-extremist-forces-in-amhara-region-in-wake-of-officials-killing/>.

13 'Amhara region blames section of 'Fano' for ruling party official's killing as PM Abiy warns of meddling by external forces', *Addis Standard*, 2 May 2023, <https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-amhara-region-blames-section-of-fano-for-ruling-party-officials-killing-as-pm-abiy-warns-of-meddling-by-external-forces/>.



protests and, particularly since the war in northern Ethiopia, they have been perceived as guardians of Amhara nationalism. Nonetheless, the Fano group is a decentralized movement with no hierarchical, centralized leadership unifying the Gondar, Gojjam, Wollo, and Shewa Amhara Fano militias. While the Gondar Fano militia is the oldest sub-division, formed as a result of the Wolqayt-T(s)egede dispute, different Fano groups were allowed to expand in recruitment and arms during the two-year war in northern Ethiopia. During the war, the Fano had established military camps, and recruited and trained members, and used the state's logistical, security, and administrative infrastructure and equipment.

These privileges were revoked in early 2022, however, with the closure of Amhara Fano militia training camps by regional, zonal, and woreda authorities. The federal and regional governments attempted to demobilize, disarm, and integrate the militia into society because, it said, illegal activities were being conducted in the name of the Fano.<sup>14</sup> The Amhara Fano militias forcefully resisted these efforts. Thousands of their members have been detained with some killed in action. Meanwhile, the detention of Fano leader Zemene Kassie in Bahir Dar was met with strong public opposition, particularly among the youth who believed that the fight with Fano and the dissolution of the group were strategies to weaken the Amhara Fano militias. Others said the government ignored frequent attacks by forces from outside the region and the Fano militias' need to defend themselves.<sup>15</sup> Hence, the Amhara Fano militias harbour a sense of mistrust towards the administration of Abiy Ahmed.<sup>16</sup>

The government faces challenges in demobilizing the militia, as they operate outside its command structure. The confrontation with the Fano has also affected the political bases of both the incumbent APP and the opposition NAMA. APP's public support has dwindled, while NaMA leadership has come under criticism and increasing internal strife as its leading members hold posts in the regional and federal governments.

On 20 May 2023, Eskinder Nega, a former blogger and former President of the Balderas for True Democracy party, announced the establishment of the Amhara Popular Front, urging civilians, Amhara Fano militias, and disgruntled Amhara government officials to 'liberate' local administrations from the PP.<sup>17</sup> The Amhara Popular Front is said to be coordinated locally by Eskinder while Dawit Wolde Giorgis (Ret. Maj.), a renowned public figure, coordinates support from abroad. Other loose groups have had overlapping if not competing agendas with the Amhara Popular Front in their attempts to unite or lead the Fano forces. These include the Amhara Fano Unity Council, led by local Fano militia leaders, including Mesafint Tesfu from the Gondar area and Merrie Wodajo (East Amhara Fano). The Amhara Popular Front did not manage to unify the Fano operations despite claims on social media that it has.

In an example of the oscillation between crackdown and appeasement of local armed resistance, on 4 June the Gojjam Fano leader Zemene Kassie was released from prison in Bahir Dar, as regional authorities sought to calm Amhara Fano militias or sow discord between Fano leaders and Eskinder Nega. Prior to Zemene's release, the Ethiopian military had announced the neutralization of a Fano alliance led by Eskinder Nega that allegedly built trenches in Selassie Monastery in East Gojjam zone.

Following the decision to disband regional special forces, armed clashes between the ENDF and Amhara

14 'ርዕሰ መስተዳድር ዶክተር ደልቃል ከፋለ የሰጡት መግለጫ', Amhara Media Corporation, YouTube, 18 May 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bE8PwqcrTU>.

15 'Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)', 25 May 2022, EPO Weekly: 14-20 May 2022, <https://epo.acled-data.com/2022/05/25/epo-weekly-14-20-may-2022/>.

16 Interview with a key informant, 13 October 2022.

17 'አስከንድር ነጋ መግጫ ሰጠ', Bete Amhara Media BAM, YouTube, 2 May 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCHx-ST6l7lw>.

Fano militia groups in the region have increased, featuring targeted assassinations of local government and security officials. The government has often attributed these assassinations to the Fano militias. The majority of fighting between the Amhara Fano militias and federal forces occurred in major urban centers such as Gondar, Bahir Dar, Debre Birhan, Debre Markos, Debre Tabor, Woldiya, Lalibela and and Shewa Robit. Amhara Fano militias started to take control of lower-level administrations in various areas, temporarily including several cities such as Shewa Robit.

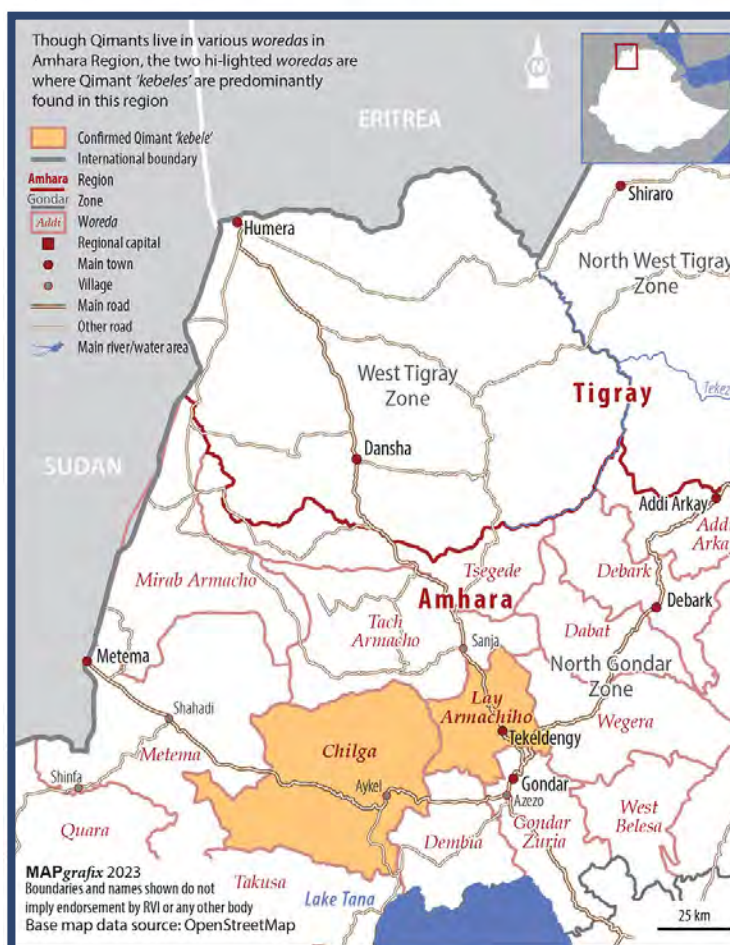
On 2 August 2023 the ENDF deployed a huge number of troops to counter the Fano, followed by declaration of a state of emergency in the region, with nationwide effect as necessary. Moreover, there were roadblocks, internet blackout (still enforceable), and a temporary suspension of air transport to the region. While the military has attempted to talk to some Fano groups, the Fano didn't want to engage in any talks as separate units. However, the scattered geographical distribution of Amhara Fano militia organizations may be a challenge to formal talks that bring them together.

### THE AMHARA-QIMANT CONFLICT

The Qimant are an ethnic minority in the Amhara region, particularly in the Chilga, Lay Armachiho, Gondar Zuria, and Wogera woredas where they have been advocating for recognition, particularly since the 2007 Ethiopian population census failed to acknowledge their ethnic identity.<sup>18</sup> The Ethiopian Housing and Population Censuses of 1984 and 1994 did acknowledge the Qimant as a distinct ethnicity, and found that they numbered 169,169 and 172,327 in those years. In December 2015, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission held Amhara Special Police and locals responsible for illegal killings in Chilga, Metema, and Lay Armachiho woredas following the establishment of the Qimant self administration special zone. This led to the deaths of 74 Qimant and 23 Amhara, and the burning of properties.

The Amhara regional administration granted that an initial 42 kebeles would be included in the special woreda, which led to Qimant protests

### QIMANT AREAS



18 Zecharias, Zelalem, 'Finish us off': Ethiopia's Qimant say targeted in armed campaign, Aljazeera, 6 October 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/6/finish-us-off-ethiopia-qemant-say-under-fire-in-armed-campaign>.

demanding more kebeles.<sup>19</sup> A referendum to identify areas whose populations wanted to be included in the Qimant administration was held on 17 September 2017 in eight kebeles. All but one voted against inclusion.<sup>20</sup> Later, the regional government approved the incorporation of 69 kebeles to be organized under the Qimant Special Zone but opposed the Qimant Self-Determination and Identity Committee's (a body founded in 2009 to coordinate Qimant claims) demand for three other Metema kebeles to be included<sup>21</sup> on the grounds that they are not adjacent to the new zone.<sup>22</sup>

Since then there have been frequent clashes between the two communities. Amhara nationalists blame the Qimant Self-Determination and Identity Committee for the violence, but the Committee has denied the accusations.<sup>23</sup> The Qimant issue was perceived by Amhara authorities as a form of proxy war led by the TPLF against the Amhara.<sup>24</sup> Especially since 2018, widespread conflict in Western Gondar, Central Gondar Zones and the area surrounding Gondar city, has claimed lives, destroyed property and displaced people. In early 2019 the conflict escalated, prompting the Amhara Region to call in ENDF on 15 February. Local Qimant administrations expressed distrust of ASF, while local Amhara alleged that federal forces favoured the Qimant.

At the onset of the conflict in northern Ethiopia in 2020-21, the Qimant armed group found themselves caught between the Amhara/ENDF and Tigrayan forces. They chose to align with the Tigrayan forces. The Qimant ethnic armed group had created alliances with various other groups, including the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), the Agew Liberation Front, and armed groups claiming allegiance to Sidama, Gambella, and Gumuz people. This alliance was officially announced on 5 November 2021 and operates under the umbrella of the United Front of Ethiopian Federalist and Confederalist Forces.<sup>25</sup>

Despite de-escalation of the conflict, many residents were living in fear of armed attacks and kidnappings.<sup>26</sup> Facilitated by the local government and civil society organizations, dialogues between the Amhara and Qimant communities have resulted in improved inter-communal relations and the return of thousands of Qimant and Amhara displaced people since June 2022.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the woreda administrations in places where the armed group has significant influence have declared a comprehensive amnesty for individuals affiliated with the group who voluntarily surrendered before August 2022.<sup>28</sup> Since then, the armed group's activity has decreased in multiple woredas, with occasional clashes with local forces, especially along the Sudanese border.

19 William Davison, Solomon Yimer and Kibreab Beraki, 'Violent Qimant dispute fueling explosive Amhara-Tigray divide', *Ethiopia Insight*, 16 December, 2018, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/12/16/violent-qemant-dispute-fueling-explosive-amhara-tigray-divide/>.

20 UN OCHA-UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'Amhara Flash Update', 1 March 2019, <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2010086.html>.

21 'Interagency Rapid Protection Assessment-Gondar, Amhara Region', Protection Cluster Ethiopia, 11-14 March 2019.

22 Davison, Yimer and Beraki, 'Violent Qimant dispute fueling explosive Amhara-Tigray divide'.

23 'Keeping Ethiopia's Transition on the Rails', International Crisis Group, 16 December 2019.

24 'Qimant Conflict', Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), <https://epo.acledata.com/qemant-conflict/>.

25 'Ethiopian rebels and opposition groups form united front against government', Turkish Radio and Television, 5 November 2021, <https://www.trtworld.com/africa/ethiopian-rebels-and-opposition-groups-form-united-front-against-government-51368>.

26 Interview with a key informant, 14 October 2022.

27 Interview with a key informant, 14 October 2022.

28 Chilga Communication, Facebook page, 3 August 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/Chilga-communication-767037400043691>.

## THE ETHIOPIA-SUDAN BORDER DISPUTE

During the Tigray war in mid-December 2020, Sudanese forces seized control of the fertile and contentious borderland of Al-Fashaga, and drove out thousands of farmers. Ethiopia sent federal soldiers and allied militias in response to Sudan's move, leading to intermittent fighting.<sup>29</sup> Tens of thousands of people fled to Sudan during the Tigray conflict, including Tigrayan fighters whom the Sudanese hosted. As tensions escalated, Khartoum requested that Ethiopian troops withdraw from the UN peacekeeping mission in Abyei, which lies on Sudan's border with South Sudan.<sup>30</sup> Sudan wants to enter discussion while occupying the al-Fashaga area, but Ethiopia has demanded a return to the status quo ante as a condition for negotiations to happen. In April and June 2022, in addition to a few skirmishes, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) fought with the Ethiopian forces in the disputed area. Tensions between the two countries escalated after the Sudanese military accused Ethiopian soldiers of killing seven Sudanese soldiers and a civilian in late June 2022. Ethiopia refuted the charge and ascribed the killing to local militias.<sup>31</sup>

Ethiopia and Sudan share a long border characterized by extensive cross-border trade. A longstanding border dispute has seen intermittent clashes among local militias. The boundary claimed by the two countries was never definitively demarcated. Although the deal was not formally ratified, Ethiopia and Sudan struck an amicable land-use deal in 2008 that allowed inhabitants of both countries to farm the disputed territory until the final demarcation was completed.<sup>32</sup>

The borderland dispute has been used internally as a trump card by the Sudanese military leadership to quell the protests and inflame nationalist feelings. The issue of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which Ethiopia is building over the Abay (Blue Nile) river, was also connected to the border dispute.<sup>33</sup> Sudan's early backing for Ethiopia over the GERD has given way to misgivings.<sup>34</sup> Attention on the border dispute reduced as the focus shifted to the Amhara region's claims to Wolqayt-T(s)egede and the northern Ethiopia war. The Amhara focus will undoubtedly revert to regaining the land they believe is rightfully theirs as circumstances permit.<sup>35</sup>

The Ethiopian government has also chosen to prioritize the north Ethiopia conflict over the contentious borderland. The situation was exacerbated by the Ethiopian government's allegations that Sudan is aiding the TPLF forces.<sup>36</sup> The federal government's reluctance to go to war over the occupied areas is a point of contention for Amhara nationalists. The borderland remained crucial from a strategic (combat) perspective, particularly as a possible entry point for TPLF forces who have bases and trained

29 'Containing the Volatile Sudan-Ethiopia Border Dispute', International Crisis Group, 24 June 2021, <https://www.crisis-group.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/b173-containing-volatile-sudan-ethiopia-border-dispute>.

30 'Withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from Abyei requires South Sudan consent's: Addis Ababa', *Sudan Tribune*, 1 July 2021, <https://sudantribune.com/article67850/>.

31 'Ethiopia denies Sudan's accusation it executed Sudanese soldiers, civilian', *Reuters*, 26 June 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudan-accuses-ethiopia-executing-7-sudanese-soldiers-civilian-2022-06-26/>.

32 'In-depth analysis: Ethio-Sudan border dispute: Manageable or time bomb?', *Addis Standard*, 20 May 2022, <https://addis-standard.com/in-depth-analysis-ethio-sudan-border-dispute-manageable-or-time-bomb/>.

33 'The Political Deadlock on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam', German Institute for Global and Area Studies, 4 November 2021, <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/gigafocus/the-political-deadlock-on-the-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam>.

34 'In-depth analysis: Ethio-Sudan border dispute: Manageable or time bomb?'

35 'Frontier Farming: Along the War-Torn Ethiopia-Sudan Border, Agriculture, Politics, and Conflict are Increasingly Entwined', Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT), 30 August 2022, <https://xcept-research.org/frontier-farming-along-the-war-torn-ethiopia-sudan-border-agriculture-politics-and-conflict-are-increasingly-entwined/>.

36 Adam Babekir & Lovise Aalen, 'The Sudan-Ethiopia border needs a soft border solution', CMI - Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2022, <https://www.cmi.no/publications/8191-the-sudan-ethiopia-border-needs-a-soft-border-solution>.



personnel in Sudan. PM Abiy Ahmed and Sudan’s Sovereign Council President Abdel Fattah al-Burhan met in July 2022 and succeeded in de-escalating tensions. Furthermore, the Metema-Gallabat dry port has reopened. However, friction along the border will continue as long as the border dispute remains unresolved.

In mid-April 2023 a civil war broke out in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman al-Burhan and Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo respectively. The two countries have a history of antagonism, and support for each other’s rebel groups. Sudan supported Ethiopian rebel groups along its western border, including the TPLF and militias in Benishangul-Gumuz. This was partly due to the SAF’s close relationship with Egypt, which sought leverage over Ethiopia because of the GERD. Addis Ababa may gain short-term benefit from the Sudan war, but a prolonged conflict, weak government in Khartoum, and increasing external influence in Sudan could attract armed and political groups seeking greater influence in the greater Eastern Africa region. The increase in refugee inflows and weak border control could lead to a surge in the arms trade and trafficking.

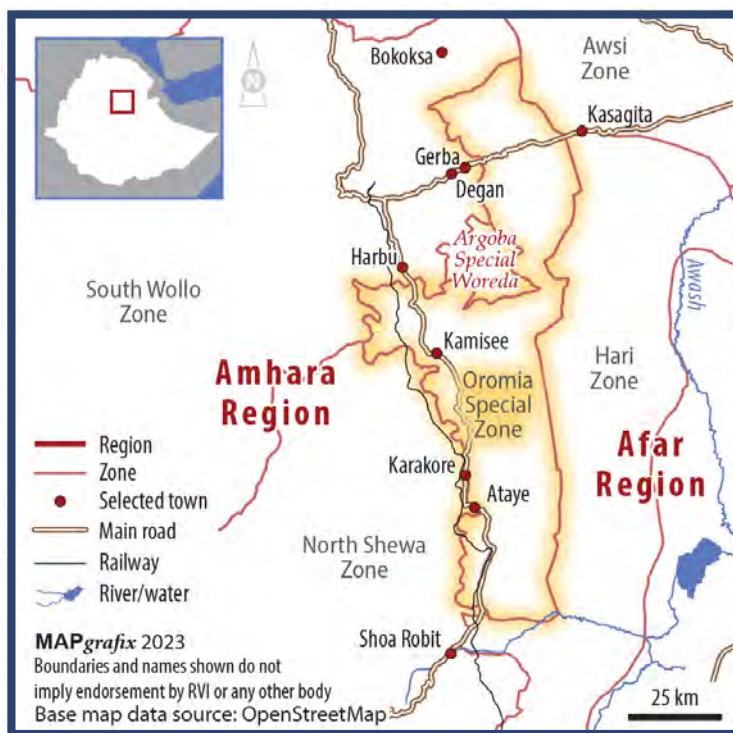
Ethiopia may also see the conflict in Sudan as an opportunity to portray itself as a more stable international partner, particularly given the progress it has made resolving the northern Ethiopian war.

### VIOLENCE IN THE OROMO SPECIAL ZONE & NORTH SHEWA

In late January 2023, violence erupted in the Oromo Special Zone and North Shewa Zone of the Amhara region after the Amhara Special Force

reportedly killed seven ethnic Oromo youth in Muti Fata village, Jile Timuga woreda. The Amhara forces claimed that they were members of the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), which was present in the zone.<sup>37</sup> On 21 January 2023 at least 28 members of Amhara Special Forces and six federal police officers were reportedly killed in an attack by Oromo gunmen on Jewaha Negeso kebele in the Eferatana Gidem woreda, North Shewa Zone.<sup>38</sup> The violence spread into the Oromo Special Zone with close to 100 civilians killed and thousands forced to leave their homes. Since 2018, the Oromo Special Zone has had several significant outbreaks of violence with hundreds killed.<sup>39</sup> Conflicts were mostly between ASF (responsible for security in the zone) and Oromo ethnic militias, sometimes referred to as the OLA (although links with the

### OROMO SPECIAL ZONE



37 ‘Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)’, 31 January 2023, EPO Weekly: 21-27 January 2023, <https://epo.acleddata.com/2023/01/31/epo-weekly-21-27-january-2023/>.

38 ‘Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)’.

39 ‘Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)’.



group are murky).

The Oromo community in the Amhara region has been exercising self-rule in the Oromo Special Zone since the early 1990s. Until recently, interactions between the Oromo and Amhara in the special zone and the nearby Amhara zones have been peaceful. The conflict has become more prevalent in the past few years, with the Oromos and Amharas perceiving increasing threats from each other. The Amhara wanted to protect their minorities within the Oromia zone and to control the threat of Oromo nationalism in their region, whereas the Oromo sensed a growing incursion of the Amhara into their territory.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Given the key drivers and the structural factors discussed above, it is likely that the Amhara Region will continue to face escalation of violent conflicts. The degree and intensity of such conflicts will vary. Some likely scenarios include:

- The disbanding of the ASF, and the struggle to disarm the Fano militias, will continue to result in intense fighting. The grievances are most likely to continue in the longer-term, thereby contributing to insurgencies. This might have regional spillover effects with Eritrea already allegedly supporting the Amhara forces while the TPLF and federal government could form a common front against the Amharas and Eritreans.
- The CoHA implementation will be seriously challenged by the fate of Wolqayt-T(s)egede, Telemt and Raya areas. Amhara and Tigray and their respective allies might enter into another war, causing prolonged conflict in the regions, and exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.
- Oromo Special Zone and North Shewa Zone of the Amhara region have seen relative calm recently. But continued incursions into the areas by OLA forces might increase the resentment in the Amhara region, and widen the tensions within the PP between the Amhara and Oromo chapters.
- The Qimant quest for self-rule and resultant conflict is more or less dormant, though not completely resolved, as there still are some Qimant armed forces operating in the areas. Likewise, the Ethio-Sudan border dynamics is likely to continue to be source of tension, but the outbreak of violent conflict between the two nations seems unlikely.



## ABOUT THE PRF

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