



**CONFLICT TRENDS REPORT  
DECEMBER 2022 - DECEMBER 2023**

# AFAR REGION

BY DAWUD MOHAMMED<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Situated in north-eastern Ethiopia, bordering the Tigray, Amhara, Oromia and Somali regions, Afar occupies a strategically important geographical position, which has become more apparent in recent years. This is increasingly counteracting its relatively small population size (around 2 million) and economy, with its only major industry being salt mining.<sup>2</sup> Afar also borders Ethiopia's neighbour, Djibouti, which currently provides its main access to the sea via Djibouti Port. Indeed, the main road access to Djibouti runs through the Afar region. To the north, Afar neighbours Eritrea, with which Ethiopia has an antagonistic relationship that has persisted despite the rapprochement between the two countries after 2018, and their military alliance during the Tigray war.

The significance of Afar's geographical position has increased since Abiy Ahmed and the Prosperity Party (PP) came to power in 2018/19, shaking up the political establishment previously dominated by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). For Afar, this has presented some opportunities, especially through the PP's inclusion agenda for the peripheries. During the EPRDF era, Afar was excluded from decision-making at the national level, which was dominated by a coalition of regional parties from the powerful Tigray, Amhara, and Oromia regions, plus the former Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR). The political party that ran Afar—the Afar National Democratic Party (ANDP)—was treated as an 'affiliate' to the EPRDF, along with the ruling parties from the so-called periphery (Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz, Harari and Gambella regions). The ANDP dissolved itself in December 2019 to become a part of the PP. As a result, Afar now has some representation, and influence, in the central committee of the PP. In fact, the PP considers inclusion of the peripheries as one of the major bases of its political legitimacy and nation-building strategy.

## THE AFAR REGION



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2 Lake Afdera in north-eastern Afar is the main source of salt in the region accounting for 80 per cent of the national market. It has attracted the attention of investors from the Tigray, Amhara and Oromia region who compete for control over the lucrative industry. For more on Afar's salt sector see: Dereje Feyissa and Abubeker Yasin, 'Afar's Salty Politics: Monopolization and marginalization in Afdera's salt business', Rift Valley Institute, 2023.

The Tigray war (2020-22), which included fighting on Afar soil, gave Samara the opportunity to develop some leverage in its relationship with the federal government due to the significant military contribution it made in the fight against the TPLF. As well as demonstrating Afar's commitment to the federal government's war, it also provided the Afar regional forces with weapons, equipment and training. More recently, Abiy's declared objective of obtaining a Red Sea port for Ethiopia, which would potentially see the development of transport routes through Afar, would be a further political and economic opportunity for the region. On 28 October 2023, Abiy visited Afar and inaugurated several development projects. If, as was believed to be the case in the latter part of 2023, Abiy's preference is for sea access via Assab in Eritrea, then Afar stands to gain politically and economically. Following Ethiopia's loss of Assab port in 1993, and the border war in 1998, most trade had shifted to Djibouti and Berbera which favoured their contenders the Issa-Somali, with settlements and political influence both in Djibouti and Somaliland. However, the January 2024 MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland, which set out the possibility of Ethiopia leasing land where a port could be constructed, appeared to shift the focus away from Afar and towards the Somali region.

## TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS: DECEMBER 2022 – DECEMBER 2023

### 2022

#### DECEMBER

17: Ethnic Afars attack Issa-Somalis in Korkoro village, zone three (Gabi) with reportedly 19 killed.

19: Issa-Somalis launch an offensive in Bareyri Ale and Yangudi Ale of Yangudiras woreda, zone five (Hari). Reportedly 47 killed and 23 wounded.

18: Youth activist from Samara University releases alleged hacked telephone conversation of senior Afari politicians on social media.

### 2023

#### JANUARY

23: Issa-Somali attack Afar villages in Abida woreda, zone three (Gabi). Three Afars and four Issa-Somalis killed.

#### FEBRUARY

17: Negotiations between Afar regional government and Afar Federalist Forces (AFF) start.

21: Heavy fighting between ethnic Afars and Issa-Somalis in Argahito, Abida and Sibaybi woredas, zone three. Estimated 66 Issa-Somali and 15 Afaris killed.

27: AFF and TPLF withdraw from occupied kebeles – Hida, Aradu and Tonsa – in Magale woreda, zone two (Kilbati).

#### MARCH

28-31: Issa-Somali launch offensive in zone three with fighting in Hanruka, Gawane, Abida, Sibaybi and kilalu woredas.

#### APRIL

19: Clashes between ethnic Afar and Issa-Somali in Abida and Gawane woredas, zone three. ENDF deployed on the border between Afar and Somali regions.

#### MAY

7-9 and 18-20: Clashes between ethnic Afars and Issa-Somalis in Yangudi woreda, zone three.

President Awol Arba blames failure to reach a peace deal with AFF on difficulties related to group members' reintegration into Afar society.

**JUNE**

Leader of AFF, Mohammed Ahmed (AKA Coronel As-Mohammed), returns to Afar region.

**JULY**

18 -19: Clashes between ethnic Afars and ethnic Argobas in Goze kebele, Argoba Special Woreda.

18 -19: Two ethnic Afars killed in Samurobi woreda, zone, during clashes with ethnic Amhara militias.

22: Two people killed in clashes between ethnic Afar and ethnic Oromo in, Hadelela woreda zone five.

**AUGUST**

2: Federal authorities seize large consignment of smuggled arms in Awash-Arba town, zone three.

**SEPTEMBER**

3: Regional security forces intercept and arrest tens of protestors during rallies against the regional administration in Samara and nearby towns.

13: Afar regional government bureau of justice sues ten protestors accused of being involved in the digital campaign against the regional government on charges of corruption and orders the freezing of their bank accounts.

18: Clashes between ethnic Afar and ethnic Issa-Somali in Kilalu woreda in zone one.

**OCTOBER**

28: PM Abiy Ahmed visits Afar and inaugurates development projects.

**CONFLICT TRENDS ANALYSIS: DECEMBER 2022 – DECEMBER 2023**

During 2023, Afar was not subject to the same high levels of deadly conflict as had been the case in the preceding year. This was largely due to the Tigray war ending in November 2022, and the fact that the front line of the Afar-Somali (Issa) conflict was established in 2022 and the clashes in 2023, although regular, were generally smaller than in the preceding year. However, the region has remained significantly conflict-affected and has been dealing with the political and social consequences of conflicts. Three specific developments are covered in this paper, which draws on monthly reporting and analysis by the Peace Research Facility.

1. The political and security legacy of the Tigray war, mainly in the north of the region.
2. The Afar-Somali (Issa) conflict.
3. The growth in political opposition to the regional government.

**POLITICAL AND SECURITY LEGACY OF THE TIGRAY WAR**

The Afar region suffered significantly during the Tigray conflict from 2020-22 with violence spilling into western zones of the region along the border with Tigray. Tigrayan forces sought, unsuccessfully, to push further into Afar and take control of the crucial Addis Ababa-Djibouti highway, a move that would have ultimately paralyzed the federal government. Afar forces actively participated in the conflict from July 2021 after joining the coalition of regional forces fighting the Tigrayan People's Liberation Forces (TPLF) alongside the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) and Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF).<sup>3</sup> During the war, Haji Seyoum Awol, the former regional president, and other senior members of his

3 Fighting alongside the ENDF were regional special forces and militias from the Amhara, Oromia and Afar regions.

administration, including the former head of Afar's regional special forces,<sup>4</sup> fled to Mekelle in November 2020 where they founded the armed group the Afar Federalist Forces (AFF). The AFF fought with the TPLF against the federal government and allied regional militias—including from the Afar region—taking control of some areas of Afar's zones two (Kilbati) and four (Fanti).

The signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) between the TPLF and the federal government in November 2022 brought the conflict to an end and saw the withdrawal of Tigrayan forces from Afar in early 2023. It also led to generally improved relations between communities living in the Afar-Tigray border region in areas previously controlled by Tigrayan forces.<sup>5</sup> During the conflict, northern Afar became heavily securitized and, at times, was effectively cut-off economically from the south of the region. This was partly due to the creation of a strictly enforced military checkpoint at Sardo (40 km from the regional capital) that prevented most traders from transporting goods into the northern zones because of fears of arms smuggling. This led to the growth of an extensive contraband trade, which has continued since the fighting ended more than a year ago (see below). For a while hundreds of grain-laden trucks destined for Tigray were stranded in Samara and unable to travel north.<sup>6</sup>

### ***War damage, displacement and economic disruption still affects northern populations***

While the CoHA between the TPLF and federal government was signed more than a year ago in November 2022, the legacy of the conflict is clearly still evident in the Afar region.<sup>7</sup> According to the federal government, 21 woredas in zones two (Kilbati), three (Gabi) and five (Hari) were affected by the war and an estimated 850,000 people were displaced, many of whom were forced to live in one of the 16 camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) established in the region.<sup>8</sup> Thousands more ended up moving to other parts of the region, or out of Afar entirely, and many of these have not yet returned. During the war, a large amount of public infrastructure – schools, hospitals, electricity, water and telecommunications – was destroyed.<sup>9</sup> A mark of the continuing disruption was the fact that more than 100,000 Afari school children could not start the school year in September 2023.<sup>10</sup> The reconstruction effort in Afar is likely to cost billions in Ethiopian Birr.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, more than 250,000 people need emergency food assistance in the region, according to the Ethiopia Disaster Risk Management Commission and the Food Cluster.<sup>12</sup>

Coupled with the destruction of infrastructure caused by the war, and the resulting impact on the local economy, the insurgency in the neighbouring Amhara region is also having a negative effect on cross-border trade in Afar. The Fano insurgency has added to the securitization of the region, with a major increase in checkpoints on the road between Samara and Kombolcha (usually a 3-hour journey by car)—a large town and market in eastern Amhara, near the border with Afar.

4 All had been removed from power in 2019 following a reform process instituted by Abiy.

5 There are still some tensions and sporadic killings in the border areas between Tigray and Afar.

6 'Ethiopia's Tigray crisis: Why are hundreds of aid trucks stranded?', BBC, 27 September 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/58681797>.

7 One of the less talked about consequences of the conflict is the large amount of unexploded ordinance that remains in the region. Through 2023 this continued to pose a danger to civilians, particularly children with around 200 being killed or injured in incidents related to unexploded ordnance. See: 'Situational Analysis of Antipersonnel Mine and Explosive Remnants of War Contamination in the Afar and Amhara Regions of Ethiopia: 2020-2022', iMMAP, September 2022.

8 Currently there are three IDP camps still operating in Afar with approximately 7,000 individuals living in them.

9 The Minister of Finance, Ahmed Shide, revealed in March 2023 that the total cost of post-war reconstruction in the affected regions of northern Ethiopia would be more than 20 billion USD. See: 'Finance minister reveals USD 20 billion required for war recovery', *The Reporter*, 18 March 2023, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/32229/>.

10 በአፋር ክልል ከ 100 ሺሕ በላይ ተማሪዎች አስከ አሁን ትምህርት አለመመዘገባቸው ተገለጸ, <https://addismaleda.com/archives/35307>.

11 'Deadly aftermath in Afar: Long-term recovery needed', Ethiopia Aid, 10 March 2023, <https://ethiopiaid.org.au/content/deadly-aftermath-in-afar-longterm-recovery-needed/gjeb25>.

12 'Ethiopia: situation Report', OCHA, 10 January 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-situation-report-10-jan-2024>.

### *Growth in smuggling blights region*

Another consequence of the war is the growth in contraband and the illegal arms trade in the region. This was stimulated by the securitization of the region during the war, with traders restricted from transporting goods to the north of the region, particularly into Tigray. Mostly this was done through relatively low-technology methods, including by donkey, camel or on foot. Key commodities for smugglers include salt, sugar and fuel. Since the war ended, the government has attempted to crack down on smuggling, however, it has developed into a very lucrative business, which has meant that some involved have chosen to continue and have even engaged in armed battles with government forces. The issue of smuggling has also proved politically divisive with many residents of zones two (Kilbati) and four—locations of much of the worst smuggling—feeling that they have been disproportionately blamed for this phenomenon. In reality, powerful figures in the regional government and security services are heavily involved.

### **AFAR-SOMALI (ISSA) CONFLICT**

The conflict between the Afar and Somali regions (specifically Sitti zone) is one of the most enduring within Ethiopia. During 2023, the conflict remained relatively static, with the Afar region retaining control of disputed territories. There were no serious attempts to bring the parties to the conflict together towards a resolution.

The root of the conflict is the expansion of the Issa-Somali population into areas historically inhabited by the Afar. After the EPRDF came to power in 1991, the Issa were able to establish settlements along the main Ethiopia-Djibouti road around the kebeles of Adeyitu, Undufo and Gadamaytu, deep inside the Afar region. These settlements flourished quickly, becoming important hubs in an illicit trade network protected by powerful local and regional backers. Recurring violent conflicts for control of these areas continued, frequently disrupting the Djibouti trade route. In 2014, a federal government brokered deal was signed between the leaders of the Afar and Somali regions to recognize the three areas as Special Kebeles within the Afar region. The predominantly Issa populated towns were given some self-governance to preserve the rights of residents. However, the Issa wanted the kebeles to be incorporated into the Somali region via a referendum, while the Afar opposed the idea of a special status on Afar land that they believe was taken forcibly.

In May 2019, the cabinet of the Somali Region, led by President Mustafe, unilaterally withdrew from the 2014 arrangement stating that it has no constitutional basis. Protests by the Issa communities in the three kebeles following the decision resulted in a violent crackdown from the Afar security forces for which the Somali forces responded in kind. Since then, the frequency and intensity of conflict has increased. After Afar forces took control of the last major town, Undufo, in the contested woredas in July-August 2022, the frontlines of the conflict have remained substantially the same for the last 18 months. The three contested kebeles of Adaytu, Gadamaytu and Undufo are all now under Afar administration. During 2023 there were, however, regular incidents of violence between Somali-Issa and Afari militias located along the borders of the contested woredas.

In March-April 2023 there was fighting across Hanruka, Gawne, Sibaybi and Kilalu woredas in Gabi zone during a large Somali-Issa offensive aimed at winning back territory that had been lost to Afar forces in 2022. While the fighting was fierce, it did not substantially change the frontlines of the conflict. In response to this, and also plans announced in April 2023 to disband regional special forces (the so-called Liyu police), the ENDF deployed a substantial force to the area. Given the heavy involvement of the regional special forces in this conflict, the aim also seemed to be to lower the intensity of the fighting and prevent it becoming a regional conflict between Afar and the SRS, rather than a more local border conflict. Between May and August there was a lull, but in September there was more fighting with another attempt by Somali-Issa militias to retake territory now under Afar control, without success. Subsequent fighting has generally been at the community level, including over contested resources, such as pasture and water-points, including in October and November 2023.



## GROWTH OF REGIONAL POLITICAL OPPOSITION AND YOUTH-LED ACTIVISM

Political division inside the Afar region is growing and the Tigray war deepened the political cleavage between north and south Afar. In 2023 this was manifested in two major events: 1) The return of members of the former armed group, the Afar Federalist Forces, with the intention of building a new political force with its base in the north of the region; 2) the growth of youth-led activism against the corruption and poor governance of the regional administration.

### *Armed group leadership return to the region*

During the Tigray war the former head of the Afar regional government, Haji Seyoum Awol, and political/clan allies, including the former head of the Liyu police in the region, founded the Afar Federalist forces (AFF), recruiting some members of his clan. The AFF fought with the TDF against the federal government and regional forces (mainly from Amhara and Afar regions). Following the November 2022 CoHA, which ended the Tigray war, the AFF agreed for a peaceful political engagement within Afar.<sup>13</sup> After negotiations during the first half of 2023, Mohamed Ahmed, leader of the AFF, returned to the region after signing a peace agreement with the regional government in June 2023. This followed a series of meetings between the AFF leadership and the president of the Afar region, Awol Arba, in Mekelle, brokered by senior members of Tigray's interim administration. Following this, the group's leadership returned to Afar and set up a new political party, the Afar Federalist Party (AFP).<sup>14</sup> AFP's support base, albeit untested electorally, is likely based in the north of Afar, where its leadership hails from. It is not yet known what kind of a political threat the AFP could pose to the Afar-PP, but the party will likely seek to exploit widespread discontent in the region due to currently difficult economic circumstances and the regional government's reputation for corruption and incompetence. The AFP also appears to have support from the Tigray region, where its leadership maintains a presence. For example, AFP leadership has put out its political messages via Tigrayan television.<sup>15</sup>

The AFP also, anecdotally, is popular in northern Afar because it pays salaries to AFF members, its military wing. This contrasts with the regional government which largely fails to pay salaries of local government employees. The AFF are also said to operate on the border between Afar and Tigray and in December there were attacks on humanitarian vehicles and drivers. In the areas that the AFF are present they hinder transportation, including stopping government vehicles.

### *Youth-led political activism grows*

In August 2023, several high-profile Afari political activists launched a hacking campaign against regional government officials and PP members. This builds on a tradition of anti-government protests in the Afar region that began with the *Duko-Hina* ('those who refuse subjugation') youth movement that arose in the late 2010s, partly to protest the exclusion of the Afar from the salt sector.<sup>16</sup> *Duko-Hina* organized mass demonstrations and blocked the main road to Djibouti port that goes through Samara. The new campaign, which includes former *Duko-Hina* members, mainly consists of releasing recordings on social media of incriminating phone calls allegedly between senior administration figures. In this way, several recordings have been posted on the Facebook page 'Afar Voice for Development', which has developed a large following. As well as the recordings, the group has also posted pictures of luxurious residencies

13 Not all members of the AFF agreed on the peace deal and the group has suffered internal splits.

14 The AFF's registration was originally blocked by the regional government but has now been accepted and it can operate as a conventional political party.

15 During the EPRDF era northern elites were favoured by TPLF. Northern Afar was part of Tigray province resulting in a greater degree of socio-cultural integration with Tigrayan society. The region was also mobilized by TPLF during its armed resistance against the Derg. Political reform has brought reconfiguration of regional power, southern elites assuming leadership positions. Some southern elites manipulated the war imperatives to settle old scores with rivals in the north, while the broader northern Afar felt marginalized and securitized.

16 See, Dereje Feyissa and Abubeker Yasin, 'Afar's Salty Politics', 15,20. *Duko-Hina* has been described as 'the *Qeroo* of Afar' – the Oromo youth movement that significantly contributed to the fall of the EPRDF in 2018.

allegedly owned by regional government members, classified documents and evidence of multi-billion-birr public sector contracts awarded to family members.

The campaign began after Kalil Ali, Assistant Professor in Computer Science at Samara University, released the audio of an alleged phone call between two senior regional government officials online. In the recording, the officials were heard orchestrating a character assassination of youth activists who are perceived to be strong critics of the regional administration. A few weeks later, Kalil was arrested and sent to prison, which infuriated local youth. This spurred them to escalate their digital attack on regional officials in September, releasing more-and-more material, while negotiating the release of imprisoned activists. Recordings of telephone calls allegedly include those made by Awol Arba, the regional president. In response, the government arrested and imprisoned two more high-profile activists in September, sparking public outrage across the region.

On 3 September 2023, protestors took to the streets of several towns including the regional capital, Samara, in large numbers and staged protests against the government. In Samara and Logya, these were intercepted by the regional police forces which rounded up the youth and arrested them en masse. In Eliwuha town, protestors blocked the main supply route (Mille-Kombolcha) that connects Afar to the Amhara region for one day and clashed with local security personnel. After negotiating with clan leaders and the elderly community leaders, the youth opened the route. In a clash with the police, several youths were injured, and others were detained. Protestors in Samara were heard chanting anti-government slogans like ‘down, down Awol Arba’ before the rally was intercepted by the police force. The strongly securitized response has had a significant impact on the activists’ ability to carry out their campaign with many of its leaders now in prison. Since this happened, the ‘Afar Voice for Development’ Facebook page has largely stopped posting material and the campaign group is effectively inactive.

## CONCLUSION AND LOOKING AHEAD

While the trend in 2023 was generally towards a decline in the conflicts in or affecting the the Afar region, there are reasons to think that the short and medium-term future may be less positive. The following factors are likely to contribute to this:

- **Abiy’s desire for a Red Sea port:** Despite the signing of an MoU with Somaliland in January 2024, Ethiopia’s search for a Red Sea or Gulf of Aden port is likely to continue, and Afar’s position on a key transport route to the coast means this process is filled with risk and, potentially reward, for the region.
- **Competition with Eritrea:** Following the signing of the CoHA with the TPLF in November 2022, Addis Ababa’s relationship with Asmara has deteriorated. In particular, this is associated with the alleged support by Asmara for the Fano insurgency in the Amhara region. Any escalation of tensions between Addis Ababa and Asmara will likely affect Afar due to its long border with Eritrea.
- **Conflict in/with neighbouring regions:** While the Afar–Somali (Issa) conflict proceeded at a lower level than in previous years, the lack of any serious attempt to resolve the violence means it will continue to be a conflict hotspot that is also influenced by national political developments (particularly related to port access). The Fano insurgency in the Amhara region, which does not appear to be declining, is also disrupting the economy on Afar’s western border, and creating insecurity in this area.
- **Internal political tensions:** Political tensions in Afar, driven by the change in leadership in 2019, the divisions accentuated by the Tigray war and a gathering economic crisis, remain substantially unresolved. The growth of youth political activism—currently being addressed through a securitized response—also points towards further unrest in the coming year(s).



## ABOUT THE PRF

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