THE STRUCTURE OF VIOLENCE:
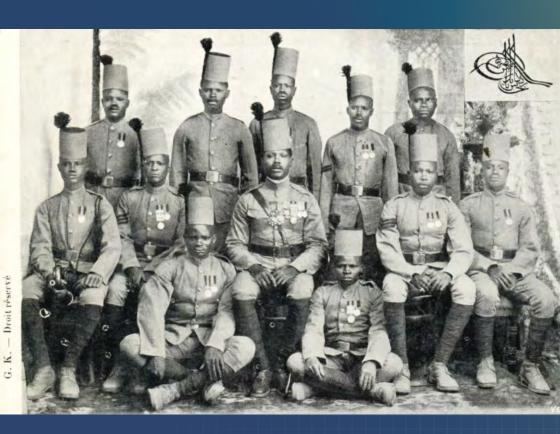## STATES, OFFICIAL MILITARIES, PARAMILITARIES, AND NON-STATE MILITIAS IN THE NORTHERN HORN OF AFRICA

DR STEVEN SERELS

XCEPT
CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS

Rift Valley Institute
MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK

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COVER

Photo: Sudanese soldiers in the Egyptian army, 1899.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Sudan and Ethiopia, official militaries are currently fighting against paramilitaries and non-state militias that, previously, had been important battlefield allies. The ongoing violence does not reflect a breakdown in the political order. Rather, these conflicts are the direct result of the persistence of a centuries-old regional military-political system created by unstable states with incomplete control over their official militaries.

Since its origins in the nineteenth century, this system has been perpetuated by violence. The right to rule was largely created through campaigns of conquest, policing patrols, armed resistance movements, and anti-insurgency military operations. As a result, the institutions of political authority have been intimately tied to the instruments of war, even though both official and unofficial armed groups have had a large degree of independence from the state.

This has not always been the case. The creation of this system required the dismantling of an older, traditional regional order in which well-defined social hierarchies ensured that actual fighting was rare. Under this older system, the primary goal of conflict was to force the weaker party to submit to integration within the hierarchy in a subordinate position. Mustering a sufficiently large force was generally enough to achieve this goal. As a result, violence was often unnecessary.

The new military-political system emerged after Egypt invaded Sudan in 1820. The conquest and colonization of Sudan allowed Egypt to develop a new, well-armed army organized along European lines and manned with Sudanese slave soldiers. Ethiopia responded to the threat of further Egyptian expansion by developing its own new armed force modelled on European official militaries. The creation of these armies required the conquest of more distant territories to ensure their sufficient supply of soldiers and provisions. Since submission was no longer the primary goal, violence became the main military tactic.

Since then, violence has become central to the creation and maintenance of modern states in the Northern Horn of Africa. During the two centuries since the Egyptian invasion of Sudan, the constellation of the warring parties has changed repeatedly. Some of the fighting has been between opposing states vying for territorial control, while some has been internecine fighting between states and the communities they claim to rule. Combat, which occurs frequently, has been deadly.

Though they played pivotal roles in the establishment of modern states in the Northern Horn of Africa, official militaries have not been fully under state control. These armies have retained a

high degree of functional independence because they are older and often better developed than the states that they are supposed to serve. Members of these militaries had their own vision for the state that was, at times, in opposition to that of civilian political leadership. Commanders and the soldiers they led repeatedly used violence to change state policy. On several occasions, they even seized control of the state.

Since the nineteenth century, civilian political leaders have tried a variety of strategies to compensate for their incomplete control over official militaries. Amongst other tactics, they have kept the size of the force to a bare minimum, relied on soldiers from outside the region, and established paramilitaries independent from the normal structure of military command. There have been some leaders who have not followed suit. For example, the rebel commanders who ruled South Sudan and Eritrea after their independence saw the state as an extension of the armed forces. Therefore, they saw no need to reign in the official military. However, these are the exceptions. Other political rulers have placed limits on the official armed forces.

Owing in large part to limits placed by the state, official armed forces have often been too constrained to secure victory on their own. As a result, states have had to form alliances with non-state militias operating within their territory. In the second half of the twentieth century, states frequently relied on these organized groups of armed civilians to force domestic political settlements that could not be arrived at peacefully. These political victories have only been possible because the state does not maintain a monopoly of violence.

State support for non-state militias has had a regionally destabilizing effect because states have been willing to support non-state militias that primarily operate in neighbouring countries. States have sought out these trans-border alliances for three reasons: 1) to meet identitarian political goals; 2) to further claims to territory along the border; and 3) to retaliate against another country for doing the same.

At times, some leaders have recognized that this system is inherently unstable because it fosters multiple, competing poles of power both within and outside of the state. These leaders understood that this instability is, itself, a continuous threat to their own power. As a result, there have been attempts at reform. Unfortunately, these efforts have failed to bring peace and stability because they have been piecemeal, when systematic change is needed. Successful reform of the regional military-political system would necessitate the reorganization of official militaries, the disbanding of paramilitaries, and the disarmament of non-state militias.

In addition, true reform requires creating real economic opportunities for ex-combatants, as well as a means of addressing collective grievances. Ex-combatants need a reason to participate in reform and to see it as a benefit. If not, they are unlikely to put down their weapons.

INTRODUCTION

On 15 April 2023, the Sudanese Armed Forces, controlled by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, under the command of General Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo (known as Hemedti), began fighting at an army base in southern Khartoum. The conflict quickly escalated, with reports of fighting or attacks on civilians in nearly every one of Sudan's eighteen constituent states by the start of 2024.[1]

While the ultimate goals of the warring parties have not been publicly articulated, Burhan and Hemedti are widely seen by outside observers as motivated by a desire to expand their individual power, avoid criminal prosecution, and increase their personal wealth.[2] These self-serving motivations led Burhan and Hemedti to participate in both the 2019 coup that ended Omar al-Bashir's twenty-nine-year rule and the subsequent 2021 coup that halted the country's democratic transition.[3] When international negotiations in early 2023 seemed to be leading to the integration of the Rapid Support Forces into the Sudanese Armed Forces, the two men turned their soldiers against each other.[4] While the negative impacts of Burhan and Hemedti's leadership are undeniable, these men are capitalizing on a military-political system that they inherited. This system has long fostered competing sources of military power both within and outside of the state. As current events are demonstrating, political unrest reinforces, rather than seriously challenges, this system.

Similar dynamics are evident across the border in Ethiopia, where the government has been attempting to disband regional state paramilitary special forces since early April 2023. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has justified this policy by claiming that these groups 'pose a risk to national unity' as evidenced by the ongoing violence in Sudan. Though this justification was given in July, the policy was announced weeks before the internecine Sudanese fighting had

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1   Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. *Situation Update – January 2024. Sudan: The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) Gains Ground in Sudan*, 12 January 2024. Accessed 22 January 2024. https://acleddata. com/2024/01/12/sudan-situation-update-januar-2024-the-rapid-support-forces-rsf-gains-ground-in-sudan/.

2   Alex de Waal, 'Sudan's Descent into Chaos: What Washington and Its Arab Partners Must Do to Stop the Shootout', *Foreign Affairs*, 27 April 2023. Accessed 18 June 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/sudan/sudans-descent-chaos?check_logged_in=1&utm_medium=promo_email&utm_source=lo_flows&utm_campaign=registered_user_welcome&utm_term=email_1&utm_content=20230719.

3   Declan Walsh, et al. 'Sudan's Military Seizes Power, Casting Democratic Transition into Chaos', *The New York Times*, 25 October 2021, updated 29 October 2021. Accessed 18 June 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/25/world/africa/sudan-military-coup.html.

4   Nesrine Malik, 'Sudan's Outsider: How a Paramilitary Leader Fell Out with the Army and Plunged the Country into War', *The Guardian*, 20 April 2023. Accessed 17 June 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/20/sudan-outsider-hemedti-mohamed-hamdan-dagalo-leader-militia-army-war-conflict.

begun.[5]

The plan to dismantle Ethiopian paramilitary forces has been met with violence, especially in the Amhara regional state. Almost immediately after the announcement of this policy, the non-sate Fano militias and the federal military opened fire upon each other in the town of Kobo.[6] Fighting escalated over the ensuing months, leading the government of Ethiopia to declare a state of emergency in Amhara in August 2023.[7] Despite the subsequent intensification of government countermeasures, fighting has continued. Unable to secure a quick and easy victory over the Fano militia, the government has used drone strikes that, as some have claimed, target civilians.[8] At the start of 2024, there was continued fighting in some urban areas of the Amhara region.

General Burhan and Prime Minister Abiy both claim that the existence of organized armed forces outside of the structure of the official military is an existential threat to the state. In this, they agree with much of the academic analysis around 'state failure' and 'state collapse.' This literature often defines sovereignty as, largely, the monopolization of violence by the state and the subordination of the instruments of war to the institutions of political authority. The erosion of this monopoly and the upending of this subordination are often characterized as the conditions that lead to state failure/collapse.[9]

Burhan and Abiy have other reasons to be concerned. Paramilitaries and non-state militias have played key roles in effecting revolutionary political change and in redrawing the boundaries of both Sudan and Ethiopia. The Sudan People's Liberation Army, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front were crucial to the establishment of South Sudan, the toppling of the Derg in Ethiopia, and the independence of Eritrea. Each of these non-state militias engaged in protracted rebellions that severely curtailed the exercise of state power in their theatre of operations.

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5   Quoted in Agence France-Presse, 'Paramilitaries Pose 'Significant Risk' to Ethiopian Unity: PM', *Barron's*, 6 July 2023. Accessed 19 July 2023, https://www.barrons.com/news/paramilitaries-pose-significant-risk-to-ethiopian-unity-pm-8d05797c.

6   Katherine Houreld, 'Ethiopian Plan to Disarm Regional Forces Sparks Protests in Amhara', *The Washington Post*, 10 April 2023. Accessed 27 June 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/10/ethiopia-disarm-amhara-tigray/.

7   'Ethiopia Declares a State of Emergency in Amhara Amdi Increasing Violence,' *The Guardian*, 4 August 2023. Accessed 2 September 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/aug/04/ethiopia-declares-a-state-of-emergency-in-amhara-amid-increasing-violence.

8   Zecharias Zelalem, '"Collective Punishment": Ethiopia Drone Strikes Target Civilians in Amhara'. 29 December 2023. Accessed 23 January 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/12/29/collective-punishment-ethiopia-drone-strikes-target-civilians-in-amhara.

9   Mohammed Ayoob, 'State-Making, State-Breaking and State Failure: Explaining the Roots of 'Third World' Insecurity' in *Between Development and Destruction*, L. van de Goor, K. Rupesinghe, and P. Sciarone, eds., London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996, 67-90; Jennifer Milliken, *State Failure, Collapse and Reconstruction: Issues and Response*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2003; Robert Rotberg, *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

While these groups successfully challenged the political order, paramilitaries and non-state militias have also at times played crucial roles in the expansion, consolidation, and maintenance of state power in Sudan and Ethiopia. Both Burhan and Abiy have benefited directly from the assistance of armed groups outside of the regular army command. Abiy was in power while the Amhara special forces and the Fano militias fought alongside the federal military during the Tigray War (2020-2022).[10] Similarly, Burhan was fighting in the War in Darfur (2003-2010) when the Sudanese government created the RSF out of the local Janjaweed civilian militia.[11]

Outside observers have started to warn that these conflicts will lead to state collapse in Sudan and Ethiopia.[12] However, these warnings misunderstand the dynamic relationship between states, official militaries, paramilitaries, and non-state militias in the broader region. Throughout the Northern Horn of Africa, comprised of Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and South Sudan, states have never held a monopoly on violence.

The ongoing armed conflict does not reflect a breakdown in the political order. Rather, the conflict in Sudan and the resistance to disarmament in Ethiopia are both the direct result of the persistence of a centuries-old regional military-political system created by unstable states with functionally independent official militaries.

Violence is foundational to this system. The right to rule has been largely established through campaigns of conquest, policing patrols, armed resistance movements, and anti-insurgency military operations. Once this right was created, the power of the state over its subjects was, and continues to be, maintained through further use of violence.

Official militaries throughout the Northern Horn of Africa are older than the states they are supposed to serve. The Sudan Armed Forces has its origins in the early nineteenth century, nearly a century and a half before Sudan gained independence. Similarly, the armed forces that would become the official militaries of South Sudan and Eritrea were founded decades before their respective countries achieved independence.

The case of Ethiopia is different only in so far as the state has been fundamentally restructured multiple times since the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, the establishment of a new official

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10   Alex de Waal, 'Ethiopia Civil War: Why Fighting has Resumed in Tigray and Amhara', *BBC News*, 1 September 2022. Accessed 27 June 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-62717070.amp.

11   'Sudan Unrest: What Are the Rapid Special Forces?', *Al-Jazeera*, 16 April 2023. Accessed 18 July 2023, http://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2023/4/16/sudan-unrest-what-is-the-rapid-support-forces.

12   International Crisis Group, 'A Race Against Time to Halt Sudan's Collapse', *Crisis Group Africa Briefing*, 190, (22 June 2023). Accessed 18 September 2023, https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-09/b190-sudan-a-race-against-time.pdf; Ishaan Tharoor, 'Sudan Slides Toward Civil War and State Collapse', *The Washington Post*, 23 April 2023. Accessed 19 September 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/23/sudan-civil-war-violence-future/; Ethiopia Hagere, 'The Making of a Domino of Failed States in the Horn of Africa: Implications for Western Foreign Policy', Borkena, 15 May 2023. Accessed 18 September 2023, https://borkena.com/2023/05/15/the-making-of-a-domino-of-failed-states-in-the-horn-of-africa-implications-for-western-foreign-policy/.

military proceeded, often by decades, the creation of a new Ethiopian state.

In every country in the Northern Horn of Africa, there have been at least perfunctory steps towards the creation of those civilian institutions of political authority that are widely seen as characteristic of a functioning modern state. Civil services, civilian bureaucracies, government ministries, and political parties were all created, though at different times in different countries.

These institutions of political authority have often proved weaker and less developed than official militaries. In fact, the organizational strength and functional independence of official militaries in the region is such that it is useful to see them as distinct from the rest of the state.

Under certain circumstances, official militaries have been able to gain control over the rest of the state and have prevented the development of meaningful civilian political authority. This has been the case in South Sudan and Eritrea since independence. In Sudan and Ethiopia, the institutions of political authority are comparatively stronger and more robust. Nonetheless, Sudanese and Ethiopian political leaders have not been able to consistently control official militaries, resulting in frequent mutinies and repeated coups during which the military seized the state from civilian control.

Recognizing the official military as an existential threat to their continued right to rule, these leaders fostered the creation of counterbalancing armed forces. They provided arms, ammunition, money, and other forms of support to both paramilitaries that were officially within the structure of the government and non-state militias that were not.

Under certain conditions, collaboration between the state and the various armed forces has been possible. Personal, communal, regional, and national grievances have been routinely channelled into service in militaries, paramilitaries, and non-state militias. These grievances have included identity-based rivalries, access to scarce resources, and demands for political inclusion. At times, these armed forces understood that working with the state was a path to achieving their goals. At other times, they conceptualized the state as a hinderance that must be overcome.

THE START OF A NEW VIOLENT ORDER

The military-political system that reigns in the Northern Horn of Africa developed over centuries through protracted armed conflicts over territorial control. The creation of this system required the progressive dismantling of an older, traditional order and its replacement with a newer one centred around modern states and modern militaries.

This process has its initial origins in the Egyptian invasion of Sudan in 1820, which caused the dissolution or radical transformation of many traditional institutions. The imperial expansion of Egypt led to the development of new militaries in the Northern Horn of Africa modelled on their European counterparts. This change in the structure, armament, tactics, and objectives of the armed forces occurred decades before Britain and Italy used their imperial armies to conquer much of the region at the end of the nineteenth century.

Standing armies had existed in the Northern Horn of Africa before Egypt and then Britain and Italy invaded the region. These armies were crucial to maintaining the balance of power between the two most powerful states in the region – The Funj Sultanate of Sinnar in Sudan and the Ethiopian Empire centred in the highlands.

In addition, these armies ensured the internal stability of these two states. In both the Funj Sultanate and the Ethiopian Empire, power was distributed through nested hierarchies of lesser local noble vassals who were subaltern to mid-level regional overlords, who were, in turn, subaltern to a supreme leader. The army ensured that those with local bases of support continued to submit to the political centre.

Soldiers were generally garrisoned in border regions and in areas of potential internal unrest.[13] They were typically well-trained, wore armour of various kinds, and carried swords, spears, or, in rare instances, rifles.[14]

Maintaining soldiers was costly and the husbanding of resources was necessary. The Funj

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13   Ayele Tariku, 'The Christian Military Colonies in Medieval Ethiopia: The Chewa System', *The Medieval History Journal* 25/2 (November 2022) 207; A. Paul, 'Some Aspects of the Fung Sultanate', *Sudan Notes and Records* 35/2 (1954) 25.

14   Richard Pankhurst, 'The History of Bareya, Šanqella and Other Ethiopian Slaves from the Borderlands of the Sudan', *Sudan Notes and Records* 58 (1977): 22; R. S. O'Fahey and J. L. Spaulding, *Kingdoms of the Sudan*, New York: Routledge, 2017 [1974], 64.

Sultanate focused its resources on its well-equipped cavalry as the number of soldiers on horseback on the battlefield was, generally, decisive.[15]

The Ethiopian state shifted the costs of the army onto the local population. Ethiopian soldiers, known as *chewa*, had special rights, privileges, and other dispensations that were enforced by the state. Chewa were granted a form of tenure over land in the area of their garrisons and had claims over the labour of the local population. During times of war, they could requisition additional supplies and services from certain civilian groups.[16]

Recognizing that standing armies could, if disloyal, pose a threat to the state, traditional rulers in both Sudan and Ethiopia also maintained their own personal guards comprised of male slaves supplemented by some professional mercenaries. Rulers at every level had their own personal guards that their seniors could demand be brought into battle.[17]

Professional soldiers were often joined on the battlefield by male peasants, who were expected to participate in war as part of the labour they owed the state. These civilian levies were neither trained nor equipped. They came to battle wearing their normal clothes and carrying whatever weapon they owned. After the campaign was over, they returned to their lives on their farms.[18]

The forces commanded by the supreme leaders of Sudan and Ethiopia were truly sizable. For example, the Ethiopian emperor in the early eighteenth century could rapidly summon over 200,000 men to battle.[19] However, there was rarely combat. The mustering of a sizeable armed force was often sufficient to inspire the opposing side to surrender even before fighting had begun.[20]

For as long as the traditional socio-political structure held, the Funj Sultanate and the Ethiopian Empire could not be seriously challenged. However, this structure collapsed over the course of the eighteenth century. In both countries, regional rulers stopped submitting fully to their supreme leaders, distantly garrisoned soldiers ceased serving the central authority, and peasants

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15   Paul, 'Some Aspects of the Fung Sultanate', 24-5; Steven Serels, 'Horses and Power in the Southern Red Sea Region Since the Seventeenth Century' in *Animal Trade and Histories in the Indian Ocean World*, Martha Chaiklin, Philip Gooding and Gwyn Campbell, eds. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 127-137.

16   Tsehai Berhane-Selassie, *Ethiopian Warriorhood: Defence, Land and Society 1800-1941*, Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2018, 59-75.

17   O'Fahey and Spaulding, Kingdoms of the Sudan, 57, 64; Richard Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia: The Northern and Central Highlands from Early Medieval Times to the Rise of Emperor Téwodros II*, Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1990, 13.

18   R. A. Caulk, 'Armies as Predators: Soldiers and Peasants in Ethiopia c1850-1935', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 11/3 (1978): 460-1.

19   Haggai Erlich, 'The Ethiopian Army and the 1974 Revolution', *Armed Forces & Society* 9/3 (Spring 1983): 455.

20   Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia*, 15.

often refused the call to battle.[21] Internally divided and with their armed forces in disarray, the Funj Sultanate and the Ethiopian Empire became extremely vulnerable to outside attack.

As the states in Sudan and Ethiopia were weakening, the government of Egypt was embarking on an ambitious modernization plan. This plan was implemented by Mohammed Ali, who had risen to power in the political turmoil that followed Napoleon's invasion (1798-1801).

Though Egypt was still a province of the Ottoman Empire, Mohammed Ali's grand vision for the country included the creation of a new army completely under his control. This new military force would be armed with the most advanced weapons and organized along European lines.

Initially, Mohammed Ali tried to conscript Egyptian peasants into his new army. When peasants fiercely resisted conscription, he changed his plans and began to assemble a slave army. Since Sudan was a primary source for slaves in Egypt, Mohammed Ali turned his attention to conquering the Funj Sultanate. In 1820, the Egyptian Army invaded Sudan with orders to send back no fewer than 6,000 male slaves suitable for military service.[22]

The Funj Sultanate fell quickly as the Egyptian Army marched southward because nearly all the lesser rulers of Sudan either submitted or fled rather than fight.[23] Once the Sultanate was defeated, the Egyptian Army began raiding non-Muslim communities to enslave their members. During the six decades of Turko-Egyptian rule, the area targeted for slave raiding progressively expanded to encompass much of contemporary western Ethiopia, southwestern and western Sudan, and South Sudan.

Physically suitable male slaves were forced to serve as soldiers in the Egyptian Army. While some were sent back to Egypt, many of these men were garrisoned in Sudan. Already by 1838, there were over 20,000 slave soldiers in the Egyptian Army stationed in Sudan.[24]

Sudanese slave soldiers were used to raid more slaves and to prevent local resistance to Turko-Egyptian colonial rule. They were also used to repeatedly invade Ethiopia in the hopes of conquering more territory.

Though the power of the Ethiopian emperor had collapsed almost a century earlier, parts of the neighbouring Ethiopian highlands were undergoing their own nearly simultaneous military reorganization. This program took place under the leadership of Kassa Hailu, an outlaw who built a personal militia of devoted soldiers to resist the predations of the established ruling

21 O'Fahey and Spaulding, *Kingdoms of the Sudan*, 93-119; Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia*, 148-50, 162.

22 Khaled Fahmy, *All The Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali and the Making of Modern Egypt*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2002, 86-87.

23 Georges Douin, *Histoire du Soudan égyptien*, Cairo: la Société de géographie d'Égypte, 1944, 277-285.

24 Mordechai Abir, 'The Origins of the Ethiopian-Egyptian Border Problem in the Nineteenth Century', The *Journal of African History* 8/3 (November 1967): 453.

class. Kassa Hailu used this personal militia to repeatedly push back Egyptian invasions of Ethiopia. He also used it, as well as his political skill, to establish a base of power in western Gondar and then subdue lesser local vassals and mid-level regional overlords in neighbouring parts of the Ethiopian highlands.

As his power grew, Kassa Hailu developed his personal militia into a standing army. He established a fixed military structure, amassed an arsenal of imported modern arms and ammunition, and founded a munitions factory.[25]

Command of this army allowed Kassa Hailu to reconstruct the political order that had largely collapsed in the eighteenth century and to place himself at the apex of the political hierarchy. Having recentralized power underneath his command, he was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia with the name of Tewodros II in 1855.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the two largest states in the Northern Horn of Africa had armies self-consciously modelled on their European counterparts. Both the new force established by Tewodros II and the Egyptian Army created by Mohammed Ali used European military technologies and employed Europeans in key positions.[26]

Despite these reforms, Tewodros II's military remained small. He never commanded more than 15,000 men. However, his successors continued to grow the imperial army. By 1880, emperor Menelik II was able to muster over 140,000 men on the battlefield.[27]

The development of these official militaries necessitated further imperial expansion. The Egyptian Army always needed a constant influx of new slave soldiers to maintain its fighting capacity. In addition to falling in battle, these slaves died from disease in high numbers because they were stationed in areas with diseases to which they had no acquired immunity. For example, every single slave soldier stationed in Khartoum died from smallpox in the late 1830s.[28]

The Turko-Egyptian rulers of Sudan had to push further to the south and southwest to enslave new communities. Quickly, the Egyptian Army became overstretched; it was too slow moving and needed supply lines that were too long.[29] Rather than risk defeat, officials encouraged

25   Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, 1855-1991, 2nd edition, Oxford: James Currey, 2001, 63-70.

26   David B. Ralston, *Importing the European Army: The Introduction of European Military Techniques and Institutions in the Extra-European World*, 1600-1914, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990, 79-106; Fantahun Ayele, 'Revisiting History of Gafat: Was Emperor Tewodros's Military Reform an Attempt at "Translative Adaptation" of Western Technology?', *African Journal of History and Culture* 8/4 (October 2016): 25-29.

27   John Dunn, '"For God, Emperor, and Country!": The Evolution of Ethiopia's Nineteenth-Century Army', *War in History* 1/3 (November 1994) 280.

28   Clive A. Spinage, *African Ecology: Benchmarks and Historical Perspectives*, New York: Springer, 2012, 1239.

29   Øystein H. Rolandsen and M. W. Daly, *A History of South Sudan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 11-12.

private merchants in the 1850s and 1860s to assemble their own private armies to extend the slave raiding frontier. Once this territory was firmly incorporated into the colonial economic system, formal colonial rule was established.[30]

Similarly, Tewodros II and his successors needed to gain control over new territories in order to compensate their loyal soldiers. Through the second half of the nineteenth century, Ethiopian emperors continued to reward battlefield success with the rights over land, as well as the privileges and other dispensations traditionally granted to chewa for their service. In fact, the hope of gaining a right to land was a major incentive for serving in the army.[31]

Though they invested heavily in developing a European-style military, Tewodros II and his successors did not fundamentally alter their idea of combat. They continued to employ the same military strategy as their predecessors. Their goal remained to inspire the enemy to submit before any fighting took place.[32] Nonetheless, actual combat was frequent and deadly. The empire increasingly sought to incorporate more and more distant communities who had less and less experience of submitting to outside rule.

These distant communities often resisted and were violently attacked. So many people were killed or kidnapped into slavery during these battles that the population of some areas declined by up to 90 percent.[33]

The establishment of new official militaries had plunged the Northern Horn of Africa into a cycle of violence. The expansion of the Egyptian and Ethiopian empires necessitated the development of these new militaries, which in turn required the conquest of more distant territories. Constant fighting weakened these imperial states and created the opportunity for European colonization.

Violence destabilized the region in the nineteenth century and made peaceful political settlement impossible. States have since used their armies to implement policies that could not be enacted peacefully. This was true for the empires that carved up the region in the nineteenth century and it is still true for the independent states established since the Second World War.

During the two centuries since the Egyptian invasion of Sudan, the constellation of the warring parties has changed repeatedly. Some of the fighting has been between opposing states vying for territorial control, while some has been internecine fighting between states and the communities they claim to rule.

30   Douglas H. Johnson, 'Recruitment and Entrapment in Private Slave Armies: The Structure of the Zarā'ib in the Southern Sudan', *Slavery and Abolition*, 13/1 (1992): 162-173.

31   Dunn, '"For God, Emperor, and Country!"', 281-2.

32   J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 3rd edition, London: Frank Cass, 1976, 127-9.

33   Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia, 1800-1935*, Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie I University Press, 1968, 111.

War has led to the repeated revision of territorial boundaries. Contemporary state borders conform, in part, to those established at the turn of the twentieth century after a prolonged multi-lateral conflict that ultimately led to the dismantling of Egypt's African Empire and the redivision of the Northern Horn of Africa between the British, Italian and Ethiopian Empires.

European colonial rule did not end the fighting. There were two subsequent major colonial wars that further redrew imperial boundaries – the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-1937) and the East Africa Campaign during the Second World War (1940-1941).

The end of European rule in the 1950s was followed by even more armed conflict. Fighting continued through the First Sudanese Civil War (1955-1972), the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005), the Eritrean War of Independence (1961-1991), and the Eritrean-Ethiopian War (1998-2000). These conflicts ultimately led to the redivision of the region between Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and South Sudan within boundaries that continue to be contested.

Combat, which occurs frequently, has been deadly. During the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005), which led to the independence of South Sudan, an estimated two million south Sudanese people died and another six million fled their homes.[34] Most recently, an estimated 600,000 people died during the Tigray War (2020-2022), according to African Union envoy Olusegun Obasanjo who played a key role in negotiating the peace that ended the fighting. However, some Ethiopian officials claim this to be an overestimate and that the true figure lies somewhere less than 100,000 people.[35]

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34   Robert Collins, 'Civil Wars in Sudan', *History Compass* 5/6 (November 2007): 1791.

35   David Pilling and Andres Schipani, 'War in Tigray May Have Killed 600,000 People, Peace Mediator Says', *Financial Times*, 15 January 2023. Accessed 20 October 2023. https://www.ft.com/content/2f385e95-0899-403a-9e3b-ed8c24adf4e7.

THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MILITARY AND THE STATE

Though they played pivotal roles in the establishment of modern states in the Northern Horn of Africa, official militaries have not been fully under state control. These armies have retained a high degree of functional independence because they are older and often better developed than the states that they are supposed to serve. As a result, the armed forces have never been completely subordinated to the institutions of political authority that they helped found.

Of the four official militaries in the Northern Horn of Africa, the Sudan Armed Forces is the oldest. It is over a hundred years older than the independent state of Sudan, having evolved slowly out of the groups of slaves forced to fight as soldiers under the rule of Mohammed Ali.

In the 1880s, these slave soldiers were organized into segregated Sudanese battalions within the Egyptian Army. In 1924, these battalions were spun off into the Sudan Defence Force. After independence on 1 January 1956, this military became the core of the expanding Sudanese Armed Forces. With these changes, came the ending of military slavery, the reorganization of the military hierarchy, and the adoption of new weapons and tactics.[36]

Over the past two centuries, this military has served, in order, the government of Ottoman Egypt (until 1882), a British vassal state in Egypt (1882-1898), a British-dominated Anglo-Egyptian government that ruled a colony comprised of both present-day Sudan and South Sudan (1898-1956), and an independent Sudanese state (from 1956). These political transformations reflect the expansion of the British empire in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and its rapid contraction less than a hundred years later.

Britain gained control of the Egyptian Army in 1882, after invading and rapidly conquering Egypt to put down a nationalist military coup led by Colonel Ahmed Urabi. Having reinstated the deposed ruler of Egypt as their client, British officials dictated Egyptian state policy for the next forty years.[37]

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36   Ahmad el Awad Mohammed, *The Sudan Defence Force: Origin and Role*, 1925-1955, Khartoum: Institute of African and Asian Studies, University of Khartoum, 1982.

37   Roger Owen, *Lord Cromer: Victorian Imperialist*, Edwardian Proconsul, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Britain used its hold on Egypt to establish and maintain power in what is now Sudan and South Sudan. This process occurred over decades. First, Britain forced Egypt in 1885 to abandon its African colonies, which had expanded to include parts of modern-day Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia. At the time, the Egyptian Army was failing to put down a religiously inspired rebellion in Sudan. This rebellion was led by Mohammad Ahmed, who had proclaimed himself al-Mahdi (the prophesied eschatological Islamic leader that would bring about the end of time).

A little over a decade later, Britain used the Egyptian Army to conquer Mahdist Sudan and the territories to its south and west. After capturing the Mahdist state's capital of Umm Durman in 1898, Britain declared that the new colony would be ruled jointly with Egypt. The Anglo-Egyptian arrangement allowed Britain to retain control over all senior positions in the colonial administration of Sudan while making the Egyptian Treasury ultimately responsible for the costs of governance. This idiosyncratic state structure also legitimized the continued use of the Egyptian Army to maintain British control over the newly conquered territory.

The rise of nationalist sentiment in Egypt after the First World War weakened Britain's hold on that country. To minimize the effects of this political movement on the British Empire, officials severed the institutional links between the governments of Egypt and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan in 1924.[38] This process included developing the Sudanese battalions of the Egyptian Army into an independent Sudanese military that would exclusively serve British imperial interests.

Though they were crucial to the establishment and maintenance of British power, Sudanese soldiers had their own vision for the state that was, at times, in opposition to that of their colonial rulers. On a few significant occasions, these soldiers used violence or the threat of violence to force a change in policy.

Soldiers were not univocal and different groups expressed different visions for the state at different times. In 1900, some soldiers mutinied to prevent officials from using them as an imperial force that could be redeployed elsewhere in the British Empire.[39] In 1923 and 1924, a group of soldiers formed the White Flag League and mutinied to advocate for Sudanese independence through unification with Egypt.[40]

Sudanese independence exacerbated the tensions between the armed forces and the institutions of political authority. Since 1956, groups of soldiers have repeatedly conspired together to seize power and reorganize the state.

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38 Jayne Gifford, *Britain in Egypt: Egyptian Nationalism and Imperial Strategy*, 1919-1931, London: I. B. Taurus, 2020.

39 Ahmed el Awad Mohammed, 'Militarism in the Sudan: The Colonial Experience', *Sudan Notes and Records* 61 (1980): 17.

40 Elena Vezzadini, *Lost Nationalism: Revolution, Memory and Anti-Colonial Resistance in Sudan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Members of the military successfully toppled the government six times – in 1958 (bringing Lt. General Ibrahim Abboud to power), in 1969 (bringing Colonel Jaafar Nimeiri to power), in 1985 (ending Nimeiri's rule and bringing about a transition to democracy), in 1989 (bringing Brigadier General Omar al-Bashir to power), in 2019 (ending al-Bashir's rule), and in 2021 (halting the transition to democracy). In addition, there have been seven more failed military coups in Sudan since 1956.[41]

The armies of South Sudan and Eritrea are also older than their respective states. Both militaries were forged during protracted liberation struggles in the second half of the twentieth century. Like their Sudanese counterpart, these two militaries do not serve the interests of civilian institutions of political authority.

Over the course of decades, rebels in each country developed their respective militias into robust armies that successfully used force to secure independence. Senior rebel commanders guided the transfer of power to new, independent states that they created. As a result, political institutions in both countries have been subservient to the interests of the army and not vice versa.

Until 2011, South Sudan was a part of Sudan and was ruled from the capital of Khartoum. Sudanese independence in 1956 did not end rule by foreigners in South Sudan. Instead, the process of 'Sudanization' of the government implemented during the transition from British rule resulted in northern Sudanese bureaucrats replacing British officials in the regional governments of the south.[42]

The process of 'Sudanization' was resisted from the outset by some Sudanese soldiers. British officials had, throughout their rule, recruited soldiers heavily from amongst southern tribes. As 'Sudanization' was underway in 1955, many of these soldiers stationed in South Sudan mutinied.[43]

Though the mutiny was quickly suppressed, some mutineers absconded from the army and carried on their armed resistance. These veterans and other subsequent defectors formed a key part of the Anya-Nya militia, which continued to fight against the Sudanese army.[44]

The resulting civil war ended in 1972 with the Addis Ababa Agreement. This peace accord granted the south a level of regional autonomy, paving the way for the reintegration of Anya-

41 Megan Duzor and Brian Williamson, 'By the Numbers: Coups in Africa', *Voice of America*, 3 October 2023. Accessed 29 October 2023, https://projects.voanews.com/african-coups/.

42 Rolandsen and Daly, *A History of South Sudan*, 84-91.

43 Øystein H. Rolandsen, 'A False Start: Between War and Peace in the Southern Sudan, 1956-1962', *The Journal of African History* 52/1 (2011): 105–123.

44 Øystein H. Rolandsen, 'The Making of the Anya-Nya Insurgency in the Southern Sudan, 1961–64', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5/2 (2011): 214.

Nya fighters into the Sudanese military.[45]

Unfortunately, peace was short lived. When many ex-Anya-Nya and other south Sudanese soldiers mutinied to protest government corruption in 1983, the central state in Khartoum implemented repressive measures that abrogated southern autonomy.

In response, soldiers defected, forming the Southern People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and its political arm, the Southern People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). These rebel soldiers quickly set up training bases in Ethiopia, which they used to create a new army strong enough to fight against the Sudanese military.[46]

The Second Sudanese Civil War lasted until 2005, when the government of Sudan and the SPLM signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. In addition to ending hostilities, this treaty created the political roadmap that led, ultimately, to the independence of South Sudan.

When the country attained independence in 2011, the SPLA was made the official military with the new name of South Sudan People's Defence Forces and Salva Kiir, the Commander-in-Chief of the SPLA, became the head-of-state with the title of President.

During the transition to independence, the new rulers of South Sudan built, in the words of Alex de Waal, 'a militarized, corrupt neo-patrimonial system of governance'. They diverted revenue from the oil sector into both their own private accounts and into a patronage network that rewards those who are loyal to political leaders.[47]

Fraud and corruption further destabilized the new country. Some SPLA members quickly realized that they could get a larger share of the diverted revenue by taking up arms against the government.

Fighting broke out in December 2013 between the South Sudan army and a new force led by rebel SPLA commanders, including Vice President Riek Machar. Though a power sharing agreement brought the rebels back into the government in 2020, the resulting peace remains fragile.[48]

Like South Sudan, Eritrea is ruled by the commanders of the rebel army that successfully fought a protracted war for independence. Senior commanders in the Eritrean People's Liberation

45   Rolandsen and Daly, *A History of South Sudan*, 88.

46   Regassa Bayissa, 'The Derg-SPLM/A Cooperation: An Aspect of Ethio-Sudan Proxy Wars', *Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities* 5/2 (December 2007): 20-24. Accessed 20 September 2023, DOI:10.4314/ejossah.v5i2.63648.

47   Alex De Waal, 'When Kleptocracy Becomes Insolvent: Brute Causes of the Civil War in South Sudan', *African Affairs* 113/452 (July 2014): 347-369.

48   Dhieu Wol, 'Controversial General Elections and the Future of Democratic Transition in South Sudan', *African Arguments*, 9 August 2023. Accessed 20 October 2023, https://africanarguments.org/2023/08/controversial-general-elections-and-the-future-of-democratic-transition-in-south-sudan/.

Front (EPLF) established the country's first independent state after capturing the capital of Asmara in 1991, ending Ethiopian rule.

For most of the nineteenth century, the territory that would become Eritrea was divided between several competing empires,[49] semi-independent vassal states, and autonomous pastoralist communities. Between 1885 and 1896, this territory was conquered by Italy and made into a single colony. Over the next century, Eritrea was ruled by Italy (1885-1941), Britain (1941-1952) and then Ethiopia (1952-1991).

Independence came through a decades long war that saw several Eritrean rebel militias take up arms against the Ethiopian state and against each other. Though the Eritrean Liberation Front started the armed struggle for independence in 1961, by the early 1980s the EPLF had effectively become the primary combatant against the Ethiopian state.[50]

During the war for independence, the EPLF repeatedly made public promises to usher in democratic rule.[51] Once in power, they did no such thing. Instead, senior EPLF commanders established a single-party state under the autocratic rule of President Isaias Afwerki.

The small group of military officials at the top of the political hierarchy then established a patronage system that ensures that ex-EPLF combatants and members of the political party they established (the People's Front for Democracy and Justice) are financially rewarded through better access to the impoverished country's scarce resources.[52]

Though the new state protects the interests of the EPLF at the expense of the rest of the population, Eritrea escaped the internecine fighting that plagued post-independence South Sudan. However, this does not mean that independence brought an end to state violence in that country. Since gaining independence in 1991, officials have prevented resistance by arresting, secretly trying, and imprisoning in harsh conditions student protestors, journalists, former members of other resistance movements, and other dissenters.[53]

Ethiopia has made some progress in bringing the military back under the control of civilian political leaders. Though these gains can easily be lost, this is no small achievement. Repeatedly

49   The specific constellation of imperial rulers and the territory that they ruled changed over time, but this included the Ottoman Empire, the Ethiopian Empire, the autonomous government of Ottoman Egypt, and the emerging Italian Empire.

50   Dan Connell, 'Inside the EPLF: the Origins of the People's Party and its Role in the Liberation of Eritrea', *Review of African Political Economy* 28/89 (September 2001): 345-364.

51   Martin Plaut, *Understanding Eritrea: Inside Africa's Most Repressive State*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 116.

52   Tekle M. Woldemikael, 'Introduction to Special Issue: Postliberation Eritrea', *Africa Today* 60/2 (Winter 2011): xiii.

53   Plaut, *Understanding Eritrea*, 123-126.

over the course of the twentieth century, both foreign and domestic militaries have effected political change in the country. Nonetheless, the military leaders who seized the state in 1991 have subsequently developed democratic institutions.

The transition to democracy followed two periods of governance by military forces. In 1974, a group of army officers seized power, deposed emperor Haile Selassie, and established a new authoritarian government controlled by Mengistu Haile Mariam. This repressive government was finally overthrown in 1991 by a coalition of rebel militias led by the TPLF (Tigrayan People's Liberation Front). The new rulers then convened elections in 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2021.

Earlier in the century, the Italian and then the British imperial armed forces also brought about political change in Ethiopia. In 1935, Italy invaded the country and the imperial state collapsed. After Emperor Haile Selassie fled into exile, Italy started to develop a new colonial administration. However, the continuation of the armed resistance by several Ethiopian civilian militias prevented the colonization of Ethiopia because these fighters ensured that Italy was only able to conquer just one-third of the country.

Though the 'patriots' (i.e. the guerilla fighters who formed the armed resistance) successfully prevented Italy from gaining complete control over the country, they were not necessarily fighting for a reinstatement of the old imperial order. Rather, patriots advocated for a number of possible post-war political settlements, some of which did not include the return of Haile Selassie to power.[54] However, the British military had other plans. In 1941, Britain joined the fight and sent troops into Ethiopia. When the Italian force collapsed, British officials ensured that Haile Selassie was reinstalled as Emperor.

With British support, Haile Selassie set about developing a new centralized state with a new modern army. After fighting had ended, the emperor minimized the power of traditional leaders and the feudal aristocracy that supported them. In its place, he established a council of loyal ministers and began to build a formal bureaucracy.[55] In addition, Haile Selassie developed a new military trained and armed by Britain that was under the sole command of the central government. Soldiers were recruited from amongst the patriots. They were organized into the new Imperial Ethiopian Army and the elite Imperial Bodyguard.[56]

Haile Selassie's control over the new armed forces quickly proved incomplete. In 1960, most of the soldiers in the Imperial Bodyguard participated in Brigadier General Mengistu Neway's

54   Aregawi Berhe. 'Revisiting Resistance in Italian-Occupied Ethiopia: The Patriots' Movement (1936-1941) and the Redefinition of Post-War Ethiopia', in *Rethinking Resistance: Revolt and Violence in African History*, Jon Abbink, Mirham de Bruijn and Klaas Walraven, eds. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003, 94.

55   Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, 201-207.

56   Kaleab T. Sigatu, 'Citizen Soldiers in Ethiopia: The Experience and Legal Framework of Reserve Force, Conscription and Militia System', *Academic and Applied Research in Military and Public Management Science* 22/2 (2023): 87.

attempted coup. However, Mengistu Neway was unable to secure the support of the army, which successfully combatted the coup and kept the emperor in office.[57]

In 1974, members of the army turned on the emperor. They deposed Haile Selassie, and established a new governing council, known as the Derg. This military coup set the stage for the centralization of authoritarian power under President Mengistu Haile Mariam, who ruled Ethiopia until 1991.

The Derg took over the state in a period of widespread political protest. As part of this pre-coup unrest, militant groups had formed to advocate for the interests of Ethiopia's various constituent ethno-linguistic communities and against Haile Selassie's centralization of power. These groups immediately recognized that the Derg's program of socialist revolution would further consolidate power and, as a result, escalated their armed resistance after 1974.

To supress this diffuse, multiparty rebellion, the Derg progressively expanded the military. From a force of approximately 40,000 soldiers in the 1970s, the army grew to over 500,000 men by 1991.[58] In addition to fighting rebel militias, the official military was used to enact a violent campaign of political terror that involved arbitrary arrests and detentions, extrajudicial killings, forced resettlement, torture, sexual abuse, dispossession of property, and induced famines.[59]

In 1988, several armed rebel groups united to form the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), with the TPLF unofficially in the role of senior member. The combined force defeated the Derg in 1991.

Once in power, the EPRDF controlled the political transition to democracy. It granted itself a large plurality of seats on the newly established Council of Representatives. It then used its dominant position to ensure that the drafted constitution closely reflected its political program.

Nonetheless, the EPRDF guided the devolution of power away from the central government through the creation of a federated political structure that empowered newly established regional state governments. The boundaries of Ethiopia's originally nine now twelve constituent regional states were drawn to reflect the primacy of ethno-linguistic communities. In addition, it set up new democratic institutions and convened regional and national elections.

This process has not been without its critics. Opposition parties complained of being shut out of the transition process and boycotted elections. This undermined the legitimacy of the new state amongst some sectors of society, causing repeated popular uprisings against the EPRDF

57 Christopher Clapham, 'The Ethiopian Coup d'Etat of December 1960', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 6/4 (December 1968): 495-507.

58 Sigatu, 'Citizen Soldiers in Ethiopia', 88, 93-6.

59 Girmachew Alemu Aneme, 'Apology and Trials: The Cade of the Red Terror Trials in Ethiopia', *African Human Rights Law Journal* 1 (2006): 64-84.

government.[60]

The EPRDF also took measures to convert its rebel militia into a national army. Unlike in South Sudan and Eritrea, the EPRDF force was reorganized with a new chain of command outside of the party structure. Further, the composition of the force was changed. Tigrayan fighters were demobilized to allow for the enlistment of soldiers from other, less represented communities.[61]

The extent to which the new Ethiopian National Defence Force is truly under the command of the state and not the ruling party has yet to be seriously tested. Though the EPRDF dissolved itself in 2019, three of its constituent groups collectively founded Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's Prosperity Party.

The TPLF was the only member of the EPRDF not to join the Prosperity Party. Outside of power for the first time since 1991, the TPLF became a vocal critic of the government. In particular, it pushed back against Prime Minister Abiy's efforts to recentralize power within the federal government.[62]

Escalating tensions led the TPLF to use its military, the Tigray Defence Forces, to attack the Ethiopian National Defence Force in November 2020. This armed force was created by integrating Tigray regional state's paramilitary special force, existing non-state militias, and defectors from the Ethiopian army. The resulting war led Prime Minister Abiy to conclude that the central government must disband regional special forces and disarm civilian militias.

Prime Minister Abiy has recognized that the Ethiopian state does not have a monopoly on violence. The new army established by the EPRDF is just one of the many organized armed forces active in Ethiopia. Some of these other forces lay either completely or, at the very least, significantly outside of the state's control.

In this Ethiopia is not alone. Throughout the Northern Horn of Africa there have long been paramilitaries and non-state militias that fight both alongside and against official militaries.

60   Yinebeb Nigatu, 'Ethiopian Politics Post-1991: A Continuous Challenge to the Peace and Stability of the Horn of Africa Region', *United Nations University, Institute of Comparative Regional Integration Studies*, Working Paper W-218/2, 2018. Accessed 30 October 2023, https://cris.unu.edu/sites/cris.unu.edu/files/W-2018%20-2.pdf.

61   Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe, 'The Ethiopian Post-Transition Security Sector Reform Experience: Building a National Army from a Revolutionary Democratic Army', *African Security Review*, 26:2 (2017): 161-179.

62   Philippe Pellet, *Understanding the 2020-2021 Tigray Conflict in Ethiopia – Background, Root Causes, and Consequences*. Budapest: Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021, 11-13.

PARAMILITARIES AS A COUNTERBALANCING FORCE

Over the last century and a half, various states in the Northern Horn of Africa have tried a variety of strategies to compensate for their incomplete control over official militaries. Amongst other tactics, they have kept the size of the force to a bare minimum, relied on soldiers from outside the region, and established paramilitaries independent from the normal structure of military command.

In the first half of the twentieth century, British officials tried to keep the colonial force in Sudan as small as possible. These officials heavily recruited Sudanese soldiers only during periods of conflict, such as the conquest of Sudan and South Sudan at the turn of the twentieth century, and during both World Wars. When peace returned, British officials retired as many soldiers as they thought possible. From a peak of 25,000 soldiers during the Second World War, officials had decreased the size of the Sudan Defence Force to just 4,560 soldiers by the end of their rule in 1956.[63]

British officials in Sudan found even this small force to be a threat to their security. They did not believe that these soldiers would protect them during an anti-colonial uprising. So, they maintained garrisons of British Army soldiers at key locations, including in Khartoum (the capital city), Port Sudan (the major import/export hub) and Atbara (the headquarters of the railway that linked them).[64]

Italian officials in Eritrea also relied on their own imperial army to act as a counterbalance to the colonial forces they had initially assembled in the nineteenth century. After taking over Massawa in 1885, Italian officials recruited thousands of men in Eritrea into an armed force that came to be called the Ascaris. This force played an important role in Italy's initial military success, helping to conquer the colony Italy would name Eritrea.[65]

The Italian campaign to conquer territory in the region ended in a devastating defeat for the Italian-led force at the hands of the Ethiopians at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. Though the Ascaris

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63   Mohammed, 'Militarism in the Sudan', 19-20.

64   Mohammed, 'Militarism in the Sudan', 16.

65   Alessandro Volterra, 'Recruiting Askaris (1885-1896): Military Requirements and Jurisdiction in Italian Official Documents and Personal Memoirs', *Journal of Eritrean Studies* 2/6 (December 2012): 58-60.

had fought alongside Italian soldiers against the Ethiopian force, Italian officials blamed them, at least in part, for the loss. Italian officials subsequently grew to distrust the Ascaris, who they believed would join a future uprising against them.

Rather than disband this force, Italian officials remade them into an imperial paramilitary that was primarily deployed to other parts of their expanding empire (i.e. Somalia, Libya, and, in the mid-1930s, Ethiopia). To maintain power in Eritrea, officials relied primarily on the Italian army.[66]

Independent states in Sudan and Ethiopia have similarly relied on an additional armed force to counterbalance the power of the official military. However, they could not call upon the service of foreign armies. Instead, they established official paramilitaries that they could more easily control.

The newly independent states of South Sudan and Eritrea have not followed suit. In both countries, the rulers who have overseen the transition to independence see the state as an extension of the armed forces that they command. Therefore, they see no need to reign in the official military.

Military rule has not been the deciding factor that determines which states seek to counterbalance the official military and which do not. In both Ethiopia and Sudan, commanders who had taken over the state subsequently created paramilitaries specifically to limit the power of the armed forces that had made their rule possible.

In Sudan, paramilitaries were established by Omar al-Bashir after he was brought to power in a military coup in 1989. Throughout his reign, al-Bashir feared that he did not have the unified backing of the Sudan Armed Forces. This fear was well grounded. In 1990, officials uncovered a plot to launch another military coup to end the nascent government's rule.

Shortly after seizing power, al-Bashir and his allies in the National Islamist Front established the People's Defence Forces, a paramilitary outside of the official military structure.[67] Initially, the new Sudanese government planned to slowly grow the People's Defence Forces over the next three and a half decades. Then in 2025, the Sudan Armed Forces would be disbanded and replaced by this paramilitary.[68]

Though the exact size of this force is unknown, by the mid-1990s it had over 10,000 active

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66   Vanda Wilcox, 'Imperial Thinking and Colonial Combat in the Early Twentieth-Century Italian Army', *The Historical Journal* 65/5 (2002): 1333-1353.

67   Atta El-Battahani, 'The Sudan Armed Forces and Prospects for Change', *CMI Insight* 3, (April 2016) 3. Accessed 3 October 2023, https://www.cmi.no/publications/5790-the-sudan-armed-forces-and-prospects-of-change.

68   Anne-Laure Mahé, 'The Security Apparatus and the Political Transition in Sudan', *Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire – Research Paper* 78 (5 September 2019): 4. Accessed 15 October 2023, https://www.irsem.fr/data/files/irsem/documents/document/file/3228/RP_IRSEM_78.pdf.

members and a reserve force of an additional approximately 85,000 men. Nonetheless, al-Bashir ultimately abandoned his plan to make it into the new official military after he fell out with Hassan al-Turabi, the leader of the National Islamist Front.[69]

Al-Bashir continued to seek out other ways to counterbalance the official military. In 2013, his government established the Rapid Support Force by regularizing the non-state Janjaweed militias that it had supported during the conflict in Darfur.

The new force was not placed under the military command. Rather it was integrated into the National Intelligence Security Service, which was seen as the main check on the power of the official military.[70] This new paramilitary was subsequently garrisoned on the outskirts of Khartoum to protect the regime from internal and external threats.

In Ethiopia, paramilitaries were established under the rule of both Haile Selassie and the EPRDF to counterbalance the perceived threat posed by the official military. While the Derg also established parallel armed groups, such as the People's Militia, they were intended to further extend the reach of the state into local and regional affairs.[71]

After the failed 1960 coup, Haile Selassie recognized that the official military was a threat to his continued rule. In response to this threat, he established the Imperial Ethiopian Territorial Army, a paramilitary with a decentralized structure that was organized at the district level.[72] While the official military was under the Ministry of Defence, this paramilitary was under the Ministry of the Interior.[73]

More recently, regional state governments in Ethiopia have established their own paramilitary special forces. A central motivation for this development has been to acquire the means to effectively resist the centralization of power at the federal level. In addition, regional state governments have also been motivated by their continued competition with one another for, amongst other things, resources and territory.

These paramilitaries have been established under Article 52 of the Ethiopian constitution, which recognizes the rights of regional states to create their own police forces to maintain internal security. Nonetheless, the constitutionality of these paramilitaries continues to be

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69   Jago Salmon, *A Paramilitary Revolution: The Popular Defence Forces*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International Studies, 2007, 8, 22. Accessed 15 September 2023, https://smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/HSBA-WP-10-Paramilitary-Revolution.pdf.

70   El-Battahani, 'The Sudan Armed Forces and Prospects for Change', 5.

71   Sigatu, 'Citizen Soldiers in Ethiopia', 97-8.

72   Yohannis Abate, 'The Legacy of Imperial Rule: Military Intervention and the Struggle for Leadership in Ethiopia 1974-1978', *Middle Eastern Studies* 19/1 (January 1983): 29.

73   Ross K. Baker, 'The Ethiopian Army and Political Stability: Prospects and Potentials', *Middle Eastern Studies* 6/3 (October 1970): 334-5.

debated. Prime Minister Abiy maintains that they are not 'police forces' and therefore need to be disbanded because they are unconstitutional.

The first of these special forces was established by the government of Ethiopia's Somali regional state in 2007. At the time, the Ogaden National Liberation Front was engaging in a campaign of violence to press for Somali self-determination. To combat this threat, the regional state government set up a special force, with the financial and political assistance of the federal government.

Other regional states subsequently followed suit, but for different ends. Many had grievances over land and access to resources that they could not settle politically. Further, officials in regional state governments were increasingly suspicious of the centralization policies pursued by the EPRDF and later the Prosperity Party. Though the EPRDF had brought them to power, these regional state governments established their own well-trained and well-armed paramilitary special forces that would be capable of posing a real challenge to the federal military.[74]

The recent Tigray War was a test of this system. Long simmering tensions between the TPLF and the federal government came to a head in 2020 over Prime Minister Abiy's decision to postpone elections due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The TPLF asserted that this decision was unconstitutional and held elections in Tigray anyway, which the federal government, in turn, claimed were illegitimate.

This political crisis turned into an armed conflict on 3 November 2020, when the Tigray Special Forces attacked Ethiopian National Defence Force bases in the region. Fighting ended with a negotiated ceasefire on 2 November 2022.

The war demonstrated to Prime Minister Abiy that the regional state special forces were, in fact, a serious challenge to the federal military. The Ethiopian National Defence Force could not win on its own. It needed to call in the assistance of the Eritrean army and air force, the Amhara Special Force, the Afar Special Force, and the non-state Fano militias.

The coalition on the federal government's side seems contradictory. The Amhara and Afar paramilitaries, as well as the Fano militias, are committed to the expansion and consolidation of regional and local power at the expense of the central state. Nonetheless, these armed groups could all see common cause with the federal government in the need to reign in the power of the TPLF.

Abiy is not the first leader to build an uncomfortable coalition to achieve success on the battlefield. Owing in large part to limits placed by the state, official armed forces have often been too constrained to secure victory on their own. As a result, states have had to form

74 Bereket Tsegay, 'Regional Special Forces Pose Threat to Peace and Security in Ethiopia', *International Peace Institute, Global Observatory*, 22 February 2021. Accessed 20 October 2023, https://theglobalobservatory. org/2021/02/regional-special-forces-pose-threat-to-peace-and-security-ethiopia/.

alliances with armed groups who otherwise act at cross purposes. This has included with non-state militias whose very existence undermines the state's claim to a monopoly of violence.

ALLIANCES WITH NON-STATE MILITIAS

Non-state militias are not a new phenomenon in the Northern Horn of Africa. They have a long history dating back centuries. In Amharic, these non-state combatants were traditionally called *shiftas*. Roughly translated as bandits, this term reflects the perspective of the established ruling class who wanted to disparage these men. Rather than acknowledge their true motives, rulers labelled shiftas as criminals who were only interested in using violence for economic gain.

The term shifta, as a result, does not properly describe these fighters. While it is true that some were motivated by greed, this was not always the case. Many took up arms for political reasons.

For centuries, men throughout the Northern Horn of Africa have formed organized militias to push back against exploitative state policies or to support an upstart political leader. In fact, Kassa Hailu began as a shifta leader and ultimately became the emperor.[75]

The non-state militias currently active in the region are continuing the fight for political change. Like their forbearers, they have a range of objectives, including a more equitable distribution of resources, better integration into the state, autonomy, or full independence.

Despite this historical continuity, contemporary militias have a different attitude towards the state than their forbearers. Though shifta militias traditionally tended to avoid submission to the political authorities, contemporary non-state militias have sought out strategic alliances with states at certain moments to advance their own interests.

This transition occurred sometime in the second half of the nineteenth century. During the multiparty conflict to redivide the region, Britain and Italy signalled their willingness to provide crucial material support to local militias in exchange for their assistance. Often, these militias had an anti-imperial agenda and were led by political upstarts who wanted to rule.

In the late-1880s, British officials gave arms, ammunition, and money to Mahmud Ali, a shaykh of the Fadlab Amarar, to establish a militia to fight against Mahdist forces in Eastern Sudan. Though British officials wanted this militia to help them conquer the region, Mahmud Ali

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75   Richard Reid, *Frontiers of Violence in North-East Africa: Genealogies of Conflict Since C.1800*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 50-1.

wanted to establish an autonomous Beja state.[76]

At the same time, Italian officials armed and financially supported a militia led by Bahta Hagos during their conquest of Eritrea. Bahta Hagos was a shifta leader who had already been using his 2000-man militia to fight to overthrow the rulers of Akele Guzay.[77]

Both alliances proved unstable. After years of defeat, many of Mahmud Ali's followers, including his son and most of his militia, defected and submitted to the Mahdists in exchange for promises of autonomous rule.[78] Similarly, when it became clear that Italy was going to rule Akele Guzay directly, Bahta Hagos and his men revolted.[79]

Italian officials again sought out strategic military alliances with local political upstarts during the campaign to conquer Ethiopia in the mid-1930s. Many of these upstarts had their own ideas for the future of the country that conflicted with Italy's military objectives. For example, Haile-Selassie Gugsa of Tigray wanted to be installed as emperor, since he was the grandson of the former emperor Yohannes IV. Hailu Tekle Haimanot wanted to rule an autonomous Gojjam and Abba Jobir Abdullah wanted to rule an autonomous Oromo state.[80]

British officials similarly relied on non-state militias to defend against a further Italian conquest of Sudan during the Second World War. After Italian forces captured Kassala in July 1940, British officials provided arms, ammunition, and economic support to specific Beja clans in Eastern Sudan to establish militias. This led to the formation of the Meadow Force to protect Port Sudan and the Frosty Force to protect the Gash Delta.

Beja men joined these new militias because they wanted to conquer territory. They knew that Britain would invade Italy's African Empire and they believed that they would be able to enlarge their grazing lands into Eritrea.

After the fighting had ended, British officials rejected these men's claim to Eritrean land. As a result, these men refused to be disarmed. Instead, they used their weapons to raid into Eritrea and to attack the British-led forces that were sent to stop them.[81]

In the second half of the twentieth century, non-state militias became even more central to

76   Steven Serels, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral*, 1640-1945, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 78-90.

77   Caulk, 'Armies as Predators', 464.

78   Steven Serels, *Starvation and the State: Famine, Slavery, and Power in Sudan, 1883-1956*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 79.

79   Mussie Tesfagiorgis G., *Eritrea*, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2010, 40-1.

80   Berhe, 'Revisiting Resistance in Italian-Occupied Ethiopi', 103-4.

81   A. Paul, *A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan*, London: Frank Cass & Co, 1971, 129-30.

the expansion and consolidation of state power in the Northern Horn of Africa. Occasionally, officials formed strategic alliances with these non-state militias to force domestic political settlements that could not be arrived at peacefully. More frequently, they used these non-state militias to destabilize their neighbours.

Though Ethiopian officials worked with the Fano militias during the Tigray War, the various governments of Sudan have been the most reliant on non-state militias to deal with domestic political problems. Sudanese government officials have repeatedly turned to these unofficial fighting forces to combat resistance movements.

During the Second Sudanese Civil War, officials cultivated the formation of non-state militias in southern Darfur, southern Kordofan, and Bahr al-Ghazal to fight against the SPLA rebel force. Local communities were amenable to fighting for the state because they had their own grievances.

The outbreak of the civil war in 1983 coincided with a serious drought. Grazing in more northern areas had become scarce, forcing Baggara pastoralists to drive their herds south earlier and maintain them there for longer than was customary. Traditional relations between these pastoralists from the north and the Dinka cultivators from the south broke down and turned violent.

The government encouraged these Baggara groups to form militias and to import arms. They also allowed them to use these arms to drive the Dinka out of their grazing zones. In return, officials had these militias provide key military support, including helping to protect supply lines deep into South Sudan.[82]

Similarly, officials relied heavily on the Janjaweed to combat rebels in Darfur in the early 2000s. The government turned to this militia for help because it was struggling to contain an armed rebellion led by the Sudan Liberation Movement and the Justice and Equity Movement. These groups claimed that the non-Arab population of Darfur was being systematically discriminated against.

To help combat this rebellion, the government enlisted the assistance of the Janjaweed. This militia was formed in the late 1980s by Arab soldiers who had settled in Darfur after participating in the prolonged conflict between neighbouring Chad and Libya. When fighting broke out in Darfur, this militia was given arms, ammunition, and financial support to fight against non-Arab civilians. Some of these attacks were coordinated directly with the official military.[83]

The only unstable region in which the Sudanese government has not relied on non-state militias

82   Jok Madut Jok, *War and Slavery in Sudan*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, 22-5.

83   John Hagan and Wenona Rymond-Richmond, *Darfur and the Crime of Genocide*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

has been in the east. This is not for want of trying. In the 1990s and 2000s, officials attempted to set up non-state militias to counter the Beja resistance movement. However, they could not find any serious local partners.[84]

States in the Northern Horn of Africa also formed strategic alliances with non-state militias that primarily operate outside of their borders. In doing so, states have had three motivations. The first was to meet identitarian political goals. For example, various leaders of Sudan have claimed to be the protectors of the Muslim population of the region and therefore supported armed Muslim groups in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The second is to further claims to territory along the border. Though international boundaries were established in the region through treaties at the turn of the twentieth century, they were never fully locally demarcated. In addition, the independence of Eritrea and then South Sudan at the turn of the twenty-first century created new areas of contestation. As a result, states have had non-state militias intervene in the protracted conflicts between Sudan and South Sudan over Abyei, between Sudan and Ethiopia over Al-Fashaga, and between Ethiopia and Eritrea over Badme.

The third is to retaliate against another state. The typical response to a trans-border alliance has been forming a competing one in the opposite direction. For example, al-Bashir's government began to support the Benishangul People's Liberation Front in Ethiopia after President Meles Zenawi affirmed in March 1994 the post-Derg government's commitment to South Sudan's right to self-determination.[85]

Over the past sixty years, an incomplete list of non-state militias that received state support includes:

From Sudan:
- the TPLF
- The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
- The Ethiopian Democratic Union
- The Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement
- the Eritrean Liberation Front
- the Benishangul People's Liberation Front
- the Oromo Liberation Front
- the Eritrean Islamic Jihad
- the Kafagn Patriotic Front

84 John Young, *The Eastern Front and the Struggle against Marginalization*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International Studies, 2007, 25-6. Accessed 10 October 2023, https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/HSBA-WP-03-Eastern-Front.pdf.

85 John Young, 'Conflict and Cooperation: Transition in Modern Ethiopian-Sudanese Relations', HSBA Briefing Paper, May 2020, 8. Accessed 24 January 2024. https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/HSBA-BP-Ethiopia.pdf

From Ethiopia:
- the Anya-Nya
- the SPLA
- the National Democratic Alliance
- the Eritrean People's Liberation Movement

From Eritrea:
- the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Tigray
- the Ethiopian People's Patriotic Front
- the Oromo Liberation Front
- the Benishangul People's Liberation Front
- the Beja Congress
- the Rashida Free Lions
- the SPLA
- the National Democratic Alliance[86]

State support of these non-state militias has been inconsistent. Support was often withdrawn suddenly. When Ethiopia and Eritrea went to war in 1998, Ethiopia withdrew its support for the SPLA, the National Democratic Alliance and several other small non-state militias operating in Sudan to try and secure Sudanese assistance or, at the very least, neutrality during the conflict.[87] Eritrea subsequently stepped in to support these groups.[88]

Though inconsistent, this support has been crucial to whatever success these groups have achieved. The arms, ammunition, and tactical support provided by states allowed these militias to seriously challenge the official military, to take and hold territory, and, in the case of the SPLA, succeed at achieving full independence.

86   John Young, *Armed Groups Along Sudan's Eastern Frontier: An Overview and Analysis*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International Studies, 2007. Accessed 10 October 2023, https://www. smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/HSBA-WP-09-Eastern-Frontier.pdf; XCEPT: Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends, *Resistance in the Peripheries: Civil War and Fragile Peace in Sudan and Ethiopia's Borderlands*, UK: Rift Valley Institute, 2021. Accessed 10 October 2023, https://www.xcept-research. org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/RVI.2023.03.23-Resistance-in-the-Peripheries-compressed_1.pdf.

87   XCEPT, *Resistance in the Peripheries*, 10.

88   Young, *Armed Groups Along Sudan's Eastern Frontier*, 30.

CONCLUSION

The military-political system in the Northern Horn of Africa produces instability because states do not hold a monopoly on violence. Though it has long been the norm in the region, this is far from the conventional understanding of how states should function. There is a general expectation that in modern states the institutions of political authority should have full control over the military and should have the ability to suppress any group that engages in violence.

Rather than be subservient to the institutions of political authority, official militaries in the Northern Horn of Africa have exhibited a strong degree of functional independence from the state. Soldiers and their commanders have used collective action to resist state policies and force political changes. In addition, members of official militaries have repeatedly seized control of states and remade them in their image.

Rulers throughout the region have recognized official militaries as threats to the institutions of political authority and have taken steps to ensure that there were other armed forces that could rein them in. These rulers have established paramilitaries that are outside of the military's chain of command. They have also fostered the creation of non-state militias that are officially unconnected from the existing institutions of political authority. As a result, they have been directly complicit in the perpetuation of this military-political system and its attendant violence.

At times, some leaders have recognized this system as a threat because it fosters multiple, competing poles of power both within and outside of the state. As a result, there have been attempts at reform.

Rulers have occasionally purged the military leadership to try and get a better hold over the military. For example, Omar al-Bashir had twenty eight senior military officers executed and had hundreds of top and middle tier officers fired in the wake of the foiled 1990 military coup in Sudan.[89]

Others have tried to bring non-state militias under some form of state control. For example, during the transition to independence, the rulers of South Sudan rapidly expanded the SPLA by absorbing members of other resistance groups. Between the signing of the Comprehensive

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89 '28 Sudan Officers Executed on Charge of Trying a Coup', *The New York Times*, 25 April 1990. Accessed 7 November 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/1990/04/25/world/28-sudan-officers-executed-on-charges-of-trying-a-coup.html; El-Battahani, 'The Sudan Armed Forces and Prospects for Change', 3.

Peace Agreement in 2005 and actual independence in 2011, the SPLA grew from 40,000 to 240,000 soldiers.[90]

These efforts have failed to bring peace and stability because they have been piecemeal, when systematic change is needed. Successful reform of the regional military-political system would necessitate the reorganization of official militaries, the disbanding of paramilitaries, and the disarmament of non-state militias. Such systematic change was attempted after the Second World War. Following the end of Italian rule and the reinstatement of Haile Selassie as Emperor, Britain and Ethiopia worked together to reform the military-political system of the Northern Horn of Africa.

Both governments stopped supporting the non-state militias that had fought against the Italian occupation and ordered them to disband. They also reorganized the armed forces under their command. Britain disbanded the Ascaris, ordered non-state militias to disarm, and demobilized thousands of Sudanese soldiers. Ethiopia contracted Britain to develop a new modern military under the exclusive command of the central government and then recruited former resistance fighters into the new army.

However, these reforms did not bring about peace and stability in the Northern Horn of Africa. Instead, they severed the relationship between tens of thousands of armed men and the state. At the same time, these reforms failed to address the underlying reasons that these men had taken up fighting to begin with.

Men who had fought to earn a soldier's salary were suddenly unemployed. Others who had fought for a share of the spoils of war suddenly had no claims to captured territory. Yet others who had fought to free themselves of the old imperial order were stuck living under colonial rule.

Rather than stand down, these men continued to fight. As a result, the late 1940s and early 1950s witnessed an increase in organized crime, as well as in violent clashes between non-state militias and official militaries in large parts of the Northern Horn of Africa.[91]

As the post-Second World War period demonstrates, true reform requires creating real economic opportunities for ex-combatants, as well as a means of addressing collective grievances. Ex-combatants need a reason to participate in reform and to see it as a benefit. If not, they will likely continue to fight.

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90   De Waal, 'When Kleptocracy Becomes Insolvent', 355.

91   Serels, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral*, 171-2.

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