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WAR AND THE BORDERLAND: SUDAN, ETHIOPIA AND ERITREA AT A TIME OF CONFLICT

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This research paper builds on work the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) has conducted on the Sudan–Ethiopia borderland under the XCEPT programme since 2021. This culminated in the report 'Resistance in the Peripheries: Fragile peace and civil war in Sudan and Ethiopia's borderlands', published in March 2023.[1] It also draws on work undertaken by the RVI as part of the Ethiopia Peace Research Facility (PRF), particularly on the Amhara region.[2] This paper was written through a combination of open-source research and utilizing a team of researchers to carry out fieldwork in Benishangul-Gumuz (Ethiopia), and Gedaref, Kassala and Red Sea states in Sudan. For reasons of security the identity of the research team and those interviewed has been kept confidential. Interviews conducted are attributed to the researchers as one in the footnotes.

KEY POINTS

- Since late 2022, internal dynamics in Sudan and Ethiopia have undergone significant change. This has impacted wider regional dynamics between these two countries, as well as between both of them and Eritrea. These changing dynamics continue to impact communities living in the borderlands of these counties, forcing them to deal with increased insecurity and political mobilization.
- Relations between Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia are becoming more polarized. Leaders of the three countries see current conflict in and near their borderlands as part of larger geopolitical dynamics involving other countries in the region and the broader Red Sea sphere of interest.
- Conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has seen a corresponding split in countries in the region, with Eritrea supporting the SAF and Ethiopia in closer alignment with the RSF. Meanwhile, the SAF continues to host Ethiopian armed movements, such as the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and Gumuz militias, while Eritrea offers

1 Also see: Enrico Ille, Mohamed Salah and Tsegaye Birhanu, 'From Dust to Dollar: Gold mining and trade in the Sudan–Ethiopia borderland', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, April 2021.

2 Atrsaw Necho and Yared Debebe, 'Understanding the Fano Insurgency in Ethiopia's Amhara Region', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, February 2024; and Atrsaw Necho, 'Ethiopia Conflict Trends Analysis: Amhara Region', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, October 2023.

support to SAF-aligned militias from eastern Sudan and some Ethiopian armed groups engaged against the government in Addis Ababa.

- SAF and Asmara are united over shared concerns about a hegemonic Ethiopia. They are worried that Addis Ababa's ties to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) could enable direct support to future RSF positions in eastern Sudan and boost UAE influence across the region. Eritrea and Sudan consequently look for ways to strengthen their positions, which includes supporting divisions in Ethiopia that could lead to continued violence and insecurity in their borderlands.
- In this context of regional polarization and militarization, many communities living in the shared borderlands between Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea continue to experience long-term political and economic marginalization. This leaves these communities particularly vulnerable to alliances of convenience. With few options to seek redress, supporting the military or political objectives of a more powerful actor becomes an appealing choice in attempting to secure their interests.
- In eastern Sudan, where the political and identity-related grievances between Beja and Bani Amer communities remain unaddressed, some Beja see support for SAF war efforts against the RSF as a way to create conditions for future political benefits. Some Bani Amer actors who are concerned that a poor relationship with the SAF and Eritrea could negatively affect their interests have sought to come to at least short-term settlements with both. Long term, however, neither of these communities feel their grievances are being addressed.
- In Blue Nile state, Ingessana and Berta competition for political dominance in the state has led them to support SAF recruitment efforts as they both seek to demonstrate that they are the most reliable ally for the SAF.
- National actors use local communities to pursue their own violent interests, arming and then demobilizing them as it suits the national conflict and political context. This creates further grievances and leaves fundamental questions about access to political and economic power largely unresolved. In the Blue Nile–Benishangul-Gumuz area some former rebels have joined the Ethiopian administration, while some Gumuz militias remain in Blue Nile state without a pathway to overcome their marginalization.
- As conflict continues, it takes on its own momentum, leading to increasingly localized violence between neighbouring competitors. Localized fracturing has been intense in Blue Nile state as communities are split between the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army-North (SPLM/A-N Sudan Revolutionary Front [SRF]) of Malik Agar and the SPLM/A-N of Abdelaziz al-Hilu (al-Hilu). Blue Nile's peoples are further divided by support for the SAF or the RSF. This creates multiple patronage options for groups seeking to secure local advantage in a highly competitive national context.
- As the national and regional conflict dynamics change, local actors remain politically and militarily mobilized but often without significant support to impose their interests, creating new grievances and sustaining local conflicts.

BACKGROUND: A TURBULENT REGION

The origin of the current dynamics in the borderlands of Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea can be largely traced to the Eritrean War of Independence (1961–1991). During the prolonged wars and complex geopolitical conflicts that followed, communities living in these shared borderlands were forced to deal with the ramifications of rapid population displacements, prolonged periods of insecurity, and pervasive political and economic marginalization. Borderland communities sought to deal with these changes and ongoing marginalization by creating or joining political opposition groups or rebel militia groups, seeking support from neighbouring countries. Many communities in these borderlands also share cross-border familial and ethnic ties that enable them to forge alliances. Thus conflict—either

between states or between communities, and often involving both dynamics—has been a key feature of these borderlands since the 1960s.

LIBERATION STRUGGLE, CIVIL WAR AND BORDER CONFLICT: 1961–2000

Contemporary competition between Ethiopia and Sudan started in the mid-1960s, with both engaging in support for rebels on the other side to shape regional dynamics to their advantage.[3] The Eritrean War of Independence, and the closely linked Ethiopia Civil War (1974–1991), saw large-scale population displacement into Sudan and the use of Sudanese territory as rear bases for Eritrean and Ethiopian insurgents. During this time, successive Sudanese governments supported anti-Addis Ababa insurgent groups such as the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and later the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM).[4] Addis supported dissident Sudanese groups such as the *Anyanya* movement from the 1960s and later the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A).

By 1991, the key regional leaders—Omar al-Bashir (Sudan), Meles Zenawi (Ethiopia) and Isayas Afwerki (Eritrea)—who would determine the next decades of events, had taken control of what are now Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea. The EPLF won its war with Addis in 1991 and Isayas negotiated Eritrean independence in 1993.[5] The Ethiopian Civil War saw the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), an umbrella group dominated by TPLF, take control of the Ethiopian state in 1991. A military coup in 1989 had already brought Bashir and the National Islamic Front (NIF) to power in Khartoum. While the NIF was supportive of the EPLF and TPLF, and Khartoum was initially friendly to the new governments in Asmara and Addis Ababa post-1991, by the mid-1990s, Khartoum had fallen out with its neighbours over its support to Islamist insurgents in both countries.[6] Ethiopia and Eritrea then began supporting anti-Khartoum forces with training and military equipment. This included Ethiopian support for the SPLM/A (which had stopped in 1991 due to the friendly relationships between the NIF and TPLF) and Eritrean support to armed groups from eastern Sudanese communities, especially Beja, Bani Amer, and Rashaida.

In 1998, relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea descended into a large-scale bloody war (1998–2000), which remained largely unresolved for decades and left a bitter ongoing dispute between Asmara and the TPLF. With this regional conflict taking their focus, Asmara and Addis Ababa scaled back their support to dissident Sudanese groups, recalibrating the relationships between these countries and Sudan. Khartoum was quick to embrace the regional division, swiftly righting its relationship with Ethiopia and embracing an uneasy detente with Asmara. As such, when Bashir's National Congress Party (NCP) formed its government in Khartoum in 1998, the NCP had also effectively neutralized the threat of Eritrean and Ethiopian support to their domestic opponents.

UNEASY PEACE: 2000 ONWARDS

From the early 2000s, relationships between Khartoum and both Asmara and Addis improved. Those in the borderlands engaged in struggle (armed or unarmed) against Khartoum were forced to come

3 Luca Puddu, 'Border diplomacy and state-building in north-western Ethiopia, c. 1965–1977', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 11/2 (2017): 236.

4 Support was also provided for other groups such as the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF, from which the EPLF split) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).

5 In 1994, the EPLF changed its name to the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).

6 Rift Valley Institute, 'Resistance in the Peripheries: Civil War and Fragile Peace in Sudan and Ethiopia's Borderlands', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2021, 10.

to terms with life without major external support. In 2006, an umbrella of eastern Sudan opposition groups signed the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (ESPA), which was as much about the relationship between Khartoum and Asmara as it was about addressing local grievances.[7] When the NCP regime failed to honour its commitments, however, ESPA signatories struggled to push back without Eritrean support. As a result, many of the grievances that the ESPA was supposed to address still remain unresolved and festering in 2024.[8]

Similarly, the SPLM/A also reached a settlement with Khartoum (the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement), which ultimately led to the independence of South Sudan in 2011. For the northern branch of the SPLM/A (SPLM/A-North, or SPLM/A-N), the CPA did not end their struggle. In 2011, when war started in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states between Khartoum and the SPLM/A-N, the latter could not count on the same support from Asmara and Addis that it had enjoyed in the past. This put the SPLM/A-N in a worse military and political position than before. Finally, those remaining armed anti-Addis groups that had benefitted from Khartoum patronage looked for support from Cairo and Asmara, where antagonism against Ethiopia remained high. While some groups received safe haven, particularly in Asmara, and some limited support, it never enabled these groups to exert significant pressure on Addis Ababa.[9]

REGIME CHANGE, RAPPROCHEMENT AND MORE WAR: 2018–2024

Events in 2018 and 2019 served to place the three countries on new trajectories. In Ethiopia, 2018 saw the rise of a new prime minister, Abiy Ahmed Ali, and his Prosperity Party. In 2019, the NCP regime in Sudan collapsed and was replaced by a hybrid civilian–military transitional government. Abiy's rise to power was the culmination of several years of protests against the EPRDF. In particular, it is a product of the alignment between Amhara and Oromo political elites, who came together to push out the TPLF from its dominant political role.[10] Ousting the TPLF set the stage for a reconciliation with Asmara, which saw in the new Ethiopian prime minister a potential ally in finally defeating the TPLF who remained in power in the Tigray regional state. The rapprochement between Addis and Asmara, for which Abiy won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019, rattled the Sudanese military establishment, which had long believed that antagonism between Ethiopia and Eritrea would prevent them from working together against Khartoum interests.[11] At the same time, the transitional government in Sudan was much less supportive of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and moved closer to the Egyptian position, which Addis took as a manoeuvre against Ethiopian interests.[12]

In November 2020, following months of tension between federal authorities in Addis Ababa and the TPLF, which governed Tigray regional state, conflict broke out. During the war with the TPLF,

7 International Crisis Group, 'Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East', Africa Report No 209, Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 26 November 2013, 5. Accessed 23 April 2024, https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf.

8 Rift Valley Institute, 'What next for Sudan's peace process? Political and security dynamics in the east', Sudan Rapid Response Update 4, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, June 2022, 2–4.

9 In 2013, the BPLM signed a political settlement and some its members joined the regional government in Assosa before rebelling again by 2019. See: Rift Valley Institute, 'Resistance in the Peripheries', 30. While the OLF remained outside the fold, mapping its trajectory is beyond the scope of this report.

10 John Young, 'Conflict and Cooperation: Transitions in Modern Ethiopian–Sudanese Relations', Human Security Baseline Assessment, briefing paper, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2020, 13.

11 Alan Boswell, 'What's Driving Sudan and Ethiopia Apart?', 18 May 2021, in *The Horn* (season 2, episode 18), produced by Maeve Frances for International Crisis Group, MP3 audio, 30:13. Accessed 10 March 2024, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/whats-driving-sudan-and-ethiopia-apart.

12 Rift Valley Institute, 'Resistance in the Peripheries', 35–36.

Addis relied on strong support from the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) and from regional special forces, particularly from the Amhara and Afar regions.[13] (Almost all regions supported the war militarily at one stage or other). Leaders from Eritrea and the regional states in Ethiopia supported Abiy principally due to grievances with the TPLF. The feud between Asmara and the TPLF goes back decades, culminating first in the 1998–2000 border war and continuing right up to 2024. Grievances in the Amhara region in Ethiopia largely relate to disputes over land, when the TPLF-dominated EPRDF government allocated land to the Tigray state post-1991, primarily Western Tigray.[14]

In November 2022, the Ethiopian federal government and the TPLF signed the Pretoria Agreement ending the civil war in northern Ethiopia. The war and the subsequent peace agreement heavily impacted regional and intra-Ethiopian dynamics. During the war, Sudanese support for the TPLF and military support to the BPLM, which had again fallen out with Addis, led to increased tensions between the regional powers during 2021 and 2022.[15] The peace agreement, however, reset the relationship between Addis and the TPLF, and helped to soften the stance of Khartoum towards Ethiopia.[16] In light of these changing relationships, it made tactical sense for the BPLM to again come to an agreement with Addis. They returned to Assosa, the capital of Benishangul-Gumuz regional state, in early 2023. In contrast, the Pretoria Agreement led to a deterioration in relations between Addis and Asmara, as well as with leaders in Amhara regional state. This was due to neither Asmara nor Amhara seeing their interests fully succeed before Addis and the TPLF reached their settlement, setting the stage for their falling out in early 2023.

Compounding these recent dynamics, the 2019 Sudanese revolution failed to deliver a transition to civilian rule. In October 2021, the military wing of the transitional government (Mil-TG) ousted the civilian authorities, creating conditions for further violence between the main security factions. Following months of growing tensions between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), violence between the two sides broke out in April 2023. Violence started in Khartoum but quickly spread across the country to Kordofan and Darfur and later, in December, to Gezira state. The SAF and the RSF have sought to mobilize fighters from eastern Sudan and Blue Nile state, which has increased tensions between communities as some are essentially forced to pick sides, leading to violence in some cases. The SAF–RSF conflict has seen a corresponding split in countries across the region, with Eritrea supporting the SAF and Ethiopia more closely aligned to the RSF.

13 Until April 2023, each of the Ethiopian regional states had a paramilitary force under the control of the regional government, referred to as 'special forces.' In theory, these regional forces were created to maintain security within the respective state. Since 2018, however, in several cases regional force members became involved in communal disputes with neighbouring areas, exacerbating and ethnicizing local conflict dynamics. This was evident during the war between the TPLF and Addis. In particular, the fighting between the TPLF and Amhara Special Forces (ASF) focused on issues of identity and land control, with numerous human rights violations occurring. See: Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, "We Will Erase You from This Land' Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing in Ethiopia's Western Tigray Zone', New York: Human Rights Watch, April 2022. Accessed 23 April 2024, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2022/06/ethiopia0422_web_0.pdf. In April 2023, regional special forces were officially disbanded with security responsibilities officially transferred to federal forces, particularly ENDF and police.

14 In 1995, Ethiopia reorganized its governance structure along ethnic lines as part of a process of creating a new national constitution based on ethnic federalism.

15 Rift Valley Institute, 'Resistance in the Peripheries', 24–25; 32–34.

16 Rift Valley Institute, 'Resistance in the Peripheries', 38–39.

EASTERN SUDAN–ERITREA–ETHIOPIA

For the last 60 years, communities living in the borderlands between Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea have sought to overcome political marginalization through a variety of means, including armed and unarmed struggle, while looking for support from both kin in neighbouring countries and regional powers. In particular, these dynamics have affected the relationships between the Bani Amer and Beja communities as Eritrea and Sudan favoured these groups at various times, enabling either their resistance to or negotiations with their national governments. The National Congress Party (NCP) built support from among the Bani Amer and encouraged the expansion of Islamist ideologies in the region, while the balance of Eritrean support favoured Beja communities in their struggles against Khartoum. In eastern Sudan, Bani Amer and Beja communities that had previously been closely associated became more divided over time as competition for political representation and access to resources increased. In the post-NCP state, the Beja have continued their struggle against political marginalization, including by aligning with the SAF post-2019 and during the current Sudanese conflict, while the Bani Amer community has felt increasingly alienated.

Meanwhile, the conflict between Addis and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF; 2020–2022) enabled closer ties between Addis and Asmara. Those relations soured, however, following Asmara frustrations at not being part of the Pretoria Agreement process that ended the war. In particular, leaders in Asmara feel that the peace process left the TPLF with too much political influence in Tigray state. Following the outbreak of the SAF–RSF conflict in April 2023, the SAF and Asmara were drawn closer together by the overlapping needs to protect eastern Sudan from RSF assaults and their desire to contain the geopolitical designs of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has backed both Addis and the RSF.[17] During the latter part of 2023, the SAF and Asmara decided to work together to recruit, train and support new military forces that could operate from eastern Sudan. By late November 2023, the Beja were sending recruits to training camps in eastern Sudan and Eritrea. While some Bani Amer initially aligned with the RSF (from 2019–2023), there have also been attempts from their community to rehabilitate their relationships with the SAF and Asmara to guard against both the potential rise of the Beja and the potential negative costs of association with the RSF.[18]

IDENTITY AND THE SEARCH FOR POLITICAL POWER

The Eritrean borderlands that neighbour Sudan consist largely of Tigre-speaking communities, with the Bani Amer being the largest. Prior to the 1960s, roughly two-thirds of the Bani Amer communities lived in Eritrea, with the remainder in Sudan, but these communities saw significant displacement after the 1960s due to the Eritrean War of Independence.[19] These displaced people often found refuge with kin or closely related Tigre-speaking and Muslim kin in Sudan. This population movement coincided with environmental challenges leading to competition over resources, which ultimately

17 On UAE support for the RSF see: Declan Walsh, Christoph Koettl and Eric Schmitt, 'Talking Peace in Sudan, the U.A.E. Secretly Fuels the Fight', *New York Times*, 29 September 2023. On UAE support for Ethiopia see: Jonathan Fenton-Harvey, 'The UAE Has Become a Major Player in East Africa. That's a Problem', *World Politics Review*, 23 January 2024. Accessed 23 April 2024, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/uae-sudan-ethiopia-east-africa/.

18 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan, January – February 2024.

19 Catherine Miller, 'Power, Land and Ethnicity in the Kassala-Gedaref States: An Introduction', in *Land, ethnicity and political legitimacy in Eastern Sudan*, ed. C. Miller, Le Caire: Cedej, 2005, 15.

resulted in an erosion of traditional livelihood systems.[20] Local competition for resources in eastern Sudan took on ethnic dimensions as national policies from the 1990s onward favoured specific ethnic groups and awarded political power based on the manipulation of ethnic loyalties.

In eastern Sudan, the main non-Arab communities that consider themselves to be the original inhabitants are Bisharin, Amarar and Hadendawa, collectively referred to as 'Beja',[21] and the closely related Hababb and Bani Amer.[22] Historically, the Beja and Bani Amer communities were closely associated but due to rising tensions since the 1990s, many from both communities now consider themselves to be more distinct.[23] To further its interests in eastern Sudan, the National Islamic Front (NIF), and later the NCP, regime supported the Bani Amer, which they saw as forming the backbone of their social and political base in eastern Sudan.[24] These communal dynamics took on additional geopolitical importance after Eritrean independence in 1993 as NIF hardliners sought to violently export their Islamist ideology. A key part of this was arming and supporting Islamist dissidents drawn largely from the Tigre-speaking peoples living in the borderlands.[25]

The rise in the political importance of the Bani Amer coincided with growing Beja frustration over their persistent political and economic marginalization. When Sudanese dissident groups opposing the NCP regime united to create the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in Asmara in 1995, many Beja joined the umbrella group.[26] As Beja support for the NDA grew, so too did NCP regime support to the Bani Amer.[27] These divisions hardened during the late 1990s, setting the stage for future tensions and violence between these communities.

NATIONAL CHANGE AND LOCAL ASPIRATIONS

Relationships between Sudan and its eastern neighbours softened by the late 1990s. This created conditions for the Eritrean-sponsored Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (ESPA), negotiated between the Eastern Front, a collection of Beja, Rashaida and Bani Amer movements, and the NCP regime. While some Eastern Front leaders were given political positions and some of its soldiers were integrated into various security forces, little in the way of development occurred to address their economic grievances.[28] The NCP regime also continued to prioritize the Bani Amer and related communities, with tensions between them and Beja members ongoing. Specifically, the regime allowed these communities to settle in areas outside traditional Bani Amer lands in eastern Sudan and gave large

20 TANGO, 'A Livelihood Vulnerability and Nutritional Assessment of Rural Kassala and Red Sea State', Final Report, Khartoum: World Food Program with Food and Agriculture Organization, United Nations Development Programme and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, May 2005.

21 There are numerous smaller communities that are also part of the broader Beja collective.

22 The Beja communities speak Tu-Bedawi, a Cushitic language, while the Bani Amer speak Tigre, a Semitic language. Historically, some Bani Amer also spoke Tu-Bedawi. See Miller, 'Power, Land and Ethnicity', 15.

23 Rift Valley Institute, 'What next for Sudan's peace process?', 1.

24 Rift Valley Institute, 'What next for Sudan's peace process?', 2–3.

25 The initial insurgent group was called the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement, which was based in eastern Sudan from the early 1990s. The group later changed its name on several occasions and splintered. See: Jihad Salih Mashamoun, 'A Prince and A Fractured Kingdom: The Case of the Sudan's Power Relations', MA thesis, The American University in Cairo, 2015, 100–105.

26 International Crisis Group, 'Sudan: Saving Peace in the East,' Africa Report No 102, Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 5 January 2006. Accessed 23 April 2024, https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/102-sudan-saving-peace-in-the-east.pdf.

27 It should be noted that at this time, as is currently the case in 2024, communities were not acting monolithically as the NCP had some supporters from the Beja, while many in the Bani Amer supported the NDA.

28 International Crisis Group, 'Sudan: 'Preserving Peace', 11–13.

numbers of refugees Sudanese identify cards so that they could support the NCP in elections.[29] Many Beja took this as a direct affront to the traditional land tenure and use system, especially as Bani Amer and related communities that moved to traditionally Beja areas in Red Sea state were given mid-level appointments in the Native Administration system, which reported to the Bani Amer *nazir*.[30] This essentially placed what the Beja felt was their traditional land under Bani Amer control, setting up future conflict between these communities.

With the collapse of the NCP regime in 2019, many Beja hoped that a new government would reverse their perceived marginalization. This was not to be the case, however, as Beja leaders and leaders of the civilian wing of the transitional government (Civ-TG) never formed a good working relationship, with Beja leaders feeling that Civ-TG leaders were biased towards the Bani Amer in similar ways as the NCP regime was.[31] The Juba peace process exacerbated the poor relationship between the Beja and the Civ-TG, as well as inflamed tensions between the Beja and Bani Amer communities. The main negotiating body, the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), went into the Juba process without representation of the main Beja communities but with Bani Amer leadership. Since the outcome of the peace process would inform political representation at local levels, many in the Beja community were worried this would mean they would again be politically disenfranchised.[32] In light of these deteriorating relationships, influential political, community and intellectual leaders from the Beja formed the Beja High Council, an interest group meant to pressure the transitional government to address Beja grievances.[33] Nazir Saeed Tirik of the Hadendawa was chosen as its leader. Tensions, which had already turned violent in November 2019, increased during 2020 and 2021, hardening identities and entrenching competition between the two communities.

Led by the Beja High Council, the Beja community looked to the military wing of the transitional government (Mil-TG), especially the SAF, for support. The SAF were more than willing to pay lip service to Beja concerns in the hopes of using their grievances to build a movement against the Civ-TG. These dynamics coalesced in mid-2021 as the Beja High Council carried out a blockade cutting off Port Sudan (in Red Sea state) from Khartoum. While this was not done with the express intent of supporting Mil-TG objectives, the Beja High Council nonetheless knew it would be beneficial to these.[34] A month later, in October 2021, the Mil-TG carried out a coup against Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok and his civilian government.

CIVIL CONFLICT IN ETHIOPIA

While these events were taking place in Sudan, similarly extensive and significant events were taking place in Eritrea and Ethiopia. Rising tensions between the TPLF and Addis developed into violent conflict in November 2020 in which the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF), along with Amhara and other

29 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan, January – February 2024.

30 A nazir is the paramount leader of a community and the highest rank in a local Native Administration. Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan, January – February 2024.

31 For an overview of these tensions, see: Rift Valley Institute, 'What next for Sudan's peace process?'.

32 For more on the dynamics surrounding the Juba peace process and communal tensions in eastern Sudan, see: Rift Valley Institute, 'What next for Sudan's peace process?', 4.

33 Formed in late 2019, the full name of the group is the High Council of the Beja Nazarat and Independent Umoodiyat (shortened to High Council). The High Council has since split, with Nazir Tirik's faction remaining dominant. Around the same time, influential actors in the Bani Amer community formed the Bani Amer Coordination Body (full name: All Bani Amer *Umoodiyat* Coordination Body), led by their *nazir*, Ibrahim Diglal.

34 Rift Valley Institute 'What next for Sudan's peace process?', 5.

regional security forces, supported the federal government. Addis was initially hopeful that Khartoum would support the war against the TPLF but this would not be the case. The SAF viewed the TPLF as its historical ally in the Ethiopian political landscape. Coupled with the growing rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea already threatening to grant the former increased hegemony in the Horn of Africa, the SAF was not willing to lose its main ally in Ethiopia by supporting Abiy's war in Tigray. Thus, the SAF refused to contain TPLF movements in the borderlands, gave upwards of 10,000 TPLF soldiers refuge in eastern Sudan and launched attacks at Ethiopian and Eritrean military positions in the disputed Fashaga region.[35] This increased tensions with both Addis and Asmara, although they each remained pragmatic in their approach to the SAF and did not take the opportunity to arm Sudanese dissident groups.

Inside Ethiopia, Addis and Asmara aligned their war effort with the Amhara community, given that all three actors have overlapping grievances against the TPLF. Amhara security forces, which included the official regional security force, the Amhara Special Forces (ASF), and locally recruited irregular militias, referred to as Fano forces, took control over much of southern and western Tigray, areas referred to as 'Wolqayt-T(s)egede', 'T(s)elmet' and 'Raya', which the Amhara consider to be part of their traditional areas.[36] When Abiy signalled an abrupt conclusion to the war in November 2022, negotiated in secret without representation from either Eritrea or the Amhara region, and leaving the TPLF to effectively continue ruling its home area (albeit through influence within the Interim Regional Administration, a body made up of TPLF members), relations between Addis and both Asmara and the Amhara quickly deteriorated.

In Asmara, government leaders were deeply upset that the Pretoria Agreement left their rivals, the TPLF, intact. The Amhara were concerned that the peace agreement left open the possibility that the disputed areas would revert to Tigray. In April 2023, Addis announced it was going to disarm regional security forces across the country, which provoked a strong reaction from Amhara, leading to clashes between the ASF/Fano, federal security forces and pro-government Amhara militias.[37] These clashes broke out into full scale insurgency in August 2023, pitting thousands of Fano fighters across the region—many ASF joined Fano groups after the special forces were disbanded—against federal security forces. The fighting then spread across much of the Amhara region through 2023 and into 2024. As opposed to the TPLF, however, the Fano insurgency is diffuse, with various Amhara communities having their own militia groups that largely operate on an independent basis.[38] As of yet, no single group or alliance has emerged with the legitimacy to negotiate with the federal government, nor is it clear if Addis wants to negotiate. Thus, the conflict is likely to continue in the short term.

There are reasons to be concerned that the Amhara conflict could become part of broader geopolitical competition. This is due to the tensions between the SAF and Addis, and Asmara and Addis. Since the conflict in the Amhara region began, there have been persistent reports of Eritrean support for Fano insurgents due to frustrations in Asmara with Addis over the Pretoria Agreement.[39] While hard

35 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan, January – February 2024.

36 Each region in Ethiopia's ethnic-federal government has its own security force that regional leaders are supposed to use to keep order in their regions. See: Necho and Debebe, 'Understanding The Fano Insurgency', 2.

37 Necho, 'Ethiopia Conflict Trends Analysis', 7–10.

38 Previous Rift Valley Institute research identifies nine umbrella Fano groups with varying degrees of coordination between them. See: Necho and Debebe, 'Understanding The Fano Insurgency', 7.

39 Necho and Debebe, 'Understanding The Fano Insurgency', 10.

to confirm, reports from inside the Amhara region strongly indicate that there is Eritrean support for military organization and training, although the provision of military equipment cannot be confirmed.[40] Any provision of support would likely happen through the Amhara or Tigray borderlands, where anti-Addis actors can operate in areas outside full control of the Ethiopian state. In addition to frustrations over the Pretoria Agreement, Eritrea views a strong and centralized Ethiopian state with suspicion. Ethiopia has similar concerns that Eritrean long-term interests are not in its favour. Thus, both countries look for ways to strengthen their position, which includes supporting divisions in the other country that can lead to continued violence and insecurity in their borderlands.

Similarly, the SAF would prefer a weakened and domestically preoccupied Addis for at least two reasons. First, they are frustrated that Ethiopia is not supporting them against the RSF. Second, they are worried that ties between Addis and the UAE could enable direct support to future RSF positions in eastern Sudan. While the SAF has not taken any overtly hostile actions, they remain wary of Ethiopia and, as with Asmara, could also see supporting the Fano insurgents as a means to ensure that Ethiopia does not provide military support to the RSF.[41] This situation is compounded by the presence of TPLF soldiers in eastern Sudan, who have been hosted by the SAF since the end of 2020, and who SAF is now trying to recruit to fight with them against the RSF.[42] As of April 2024, TPLF leaders in Mekelle (the capital of Tigray regional state) still appear to be trying to work through and use the Pretoria Agreement to secure their interests, and so while they may still want to maintain their positive relationship with SAF, they will have to balance this with their need to win concessions from Addis. Should the relationship between Mekelle and Addis turn hostile, however, this could change.

SUDANESE FRACTURES

As conflict was breaking out in the Amhara region, rising tensions between the SAF and the RSF resulted in large-scale war in Sudan in April 2023.[43] As the fighting spread, RSF soldiers occupied much of Khartoum, Kordofan and Darfur, with the SAF controlling central, northern and eastern Sudan, while maintaining small pockets of control around Khartoum, Kordofan and al-Fashir in Darfur. With the loss of much of Khartoum, the de facto SAF capital became Port Sudan, adding further importance to its relationship with the people of eastern Sudan. Since then, the SAF has looked to some of these communities to shore up its legitimacy and as a means to carry out recruitment in their fight against the RSF. RSF advancement into Gezira and Sennar states in December 2023 highlighted SAF vulnerability and placed increased emphasis on protecting eastern Sudan from future assaults.

RSF advances also highlight the geopolitical importance of eastern Sudan to Asmara, which has long considered the area to be a national security priority. Specifically, Asmara wants to direct events in eastern Sudan to ensure its allies have sufficient political and security influence to prevent its perceived enemies from exploiting insecurity or unrest against its interests. This includes protecting the area from those who would use it to destabilize its government. Eritrean leaders view the RSF as an extension of Emirati influence in the Horn of Africa and are concerned about being encircled

40 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan, January-April 2024.

41 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan, January-April 2024.

42 Interview with researcher familiar with the subject, May 2024.

43 On the outbreak of the conflict, see: Rift Valley Institute, 'Hemedti Challenges SAF's Control Over Sudan', Sudan Rapid Response Update 1, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, May 2023.

by UAE allies (especially Ethiopia) since falling out with the UAE after 2021. Beyond just a simple competition with the UAE, Eritrean leaders have a vision of the Horn of Africa that can be summed up as a strong and independent Horn under Eritrean tutelage, which has significant influence in the broader region (including the Red Sea) and countries that are not mere proxies for other countries such as the UAE.[44]

The SAF and Asmara have been brought together by the overlapping need for both to protect eastern Sudan from RSF assaults and fears about UAE geopolitical designs. The SAF need for legitimacy and military support, and Eritrean geographical concerns, brought them into closer alignment than they have been for decades. During the latter part of 2023, the SAF and Asmara decided to work together to recruit, train and support new military forces that could operate from eastern Sudan to both protect it and eventually launch attacks on RSF positions in central Sudan. For both actors, the process was as much about political power as it was military force, as they were both concerned with building political support by empowering specific communities. By late November 2023, the Beja (especially Bisharin, Amara and Hadendawa) were sending new recruits to training camps in either eastern Sudan or in Eritrea. They were joined by new recruits from the Sudan Liberation Army of Minni Minnawi (SLA-MM) and the Justice and Equality Movement led by Jibril Ibrahim (JEM-Jibril), who had recruited from among western Sudanese communities living in eastern Sudan.[45] Another group under al-Amin Daoud, a Habab from Red Sea state, was also recruited and sent for training. In early 2024, recruitment efforts were expanded to include those from central Sudan (Gezira and Sennar) and members of northern Sudanese communities organized as the Northern Shield forces.[46]

The current recruitment is taking place in a context of unresolved tensions and grievances surrounding how political representation is apportioned in eastern Sudan as well as residual grievances over communal violence. These dynamics are further compounded by the relationships between these communities and the security forces. After the October 2021 coup, the Beja maintained their relationship with the SAF. In 2020 and 2021, as the Beja looked to the SAF for support, some Bani Amer and associated communities looked to the RSF for support and the RSF opened a recruitment and training centre in Kassala.[47] When the SAF–RSF conflict broke out, Bani Amer leaders were aware of the vulnerabilities their association with the RSF created for them, and most were quick to distance themselves from it.[48] The RSF soldiers based in Kassala quickly abandoned their bases, although it is not clear where they went as traveling to Khartoum would have been too risky.[49]

44 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan, January-April 2024.

45 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan, January-April 2024. Also see: 'Eritrea military training camps raise concerns about security in eastern Sudan', *Radio Dabanga*, 26 January 2024. Accessed 23 April 2024, https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/eritrea-training-camps-raise-concerns-about-security-situation-in-eastern-sudan. There are large numbers of non-Arabic people of western Sudanese origin, including the Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa, who have migrated to the east since the 1980s to work in mechanized farming schemes. Some are descendants of older migrations that occurred during the Mahdist period as its army was moving eastwards in the 1880s.

46 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan, January-April 2024. Those from central Sudan were largely recruited after the RSF invaded the area in mid-December 2023. The Northern Shield forces are part of a broader movement led by ex-SAF officers close to the former NCP regime, under the leadership of former SAF spokesperson General al-Sawarmi Khalid Saad.

47 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan, January-April 2024. Also see: Rift Valley Institute, 'What next for Sudan's peace process?', 4-6.

48 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan, January-April 2024.

49 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan – January-April 2024.

Some Bani Amer and associated community leaders also saw an opportunity to rehabilitate their relationship with Asmara. One example of this is al-Amin Daoud, a leading member of the SRF in 2019 and initially part of the Juba peace process.[50] During the Juba peace process, Daoud had a contentious and confrontational relationship with some Beja community leaders, as well as links with anti-Asmara insurgent groups based in eastern Sudan. Eritrean pressure and his caustic and inflammatory rhetoric led the SRF to remove him and appoint his deputy in his place.[51] Following this, Daoud remained in political purgatory outside the SRF. After the outbreak of war between the SAF and the RSF, and factoring the growing influence of the Eritrea in eastern Sudan, he had little choice but to reconcile with Asmara. In this, Daoud had help from Minni Minnawi, and from an Asmara leadership that saw it as in their interests to have influence among part of the broader Bani Amer community.[52] Others in the Bani Amer community, including those associated with the nazir, have been left out of these alliances and remain worried about their political futures, considering both their poor relationships with the SAF and their potentially ascendant Beja rivals.

BLUE NILE–BENISHANGUL-GUMUZ BORDERLANDS

Similar to eastern Sudan, the borderlands further south between Blue Nile state in Sudan and Benishangul-Gumuz region in Ethiopia are also geopolitically important: The Blue Nile River flows through both areas and each has rich mineral resources.[53] Similar to communities living further north, the people living in this borderland area have been historically marginalized, with their fates being intimately wrapped up in the relationships between Khartoum and Addis.[54] The Sudanese Armed Forces–Rapid Support Forces (SAF–RSF) conflict has also complicated communal dynamics in Blue Nile state by providing a rationale for increased mobilization in a way that sets the stage for further communal competition. Communities increasingly support military recruitment drives by both belligerents, while local political grievances remain unaddressed. This growing fragmentation has created more fragility and heightened the risk of further local conflict between communities—especially once the SAF–RSF conflict lessens.

In neighbouring Benishangul-Gumuz region, national tensions have also heightened communal violence in recent years. Since 2018, opposition to the new government in Addis and competition over land usage has driven some Benishangul (as part of the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement [BPLM]) and Gumuz communities into Blue Nile state, where they have organized armed resistance. From 2020, both the dissident BPLM and some Gumuz militias have operated in loose coordination as the SAF has provided military and monetary support, as well as facilitated links with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Neither group, however, has been able to challenge Addis Ababa. As relations between the SAF and Addis shifted and the war in Tigray ended, the BPLM re-joined the

50 At the start of the Juba peace process, Daoud was the leader of the United Peoples Front for Liberation and Justice (UPFLJ), part of the SRF umbrella group.

51 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan, January-April 2024.

52 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan, January-April 2024. Minni and Daoud have been linked together since 2020, when Minni was trying to build a dissident SRF coalition after falling out with other SRF leaders. See: 'Minnawi calls to discuss SRF future, include new groups in Darfur peace process', *Sudan Tribune*, 14 April 2020. Accessed 23 April 2024, https://web.archive.org/web/20200418023843/https://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article69214.

53 Rift Valley Institute, 'Resistance in the Peripheries', 12.

54 Rift Valley Institute, 'Resistance in the Peripheries', 8–11.

state government. Since 2022, holdout Gumuz militias, the political and economic marginalization of which remains unaddressed, have faced significant challenges. While they are still mostly based in Blue Nile state in Sudan, their capacity has been greatly reduced and they lack significant support from the SAF.

THE IMPACT OF CONFLICTS IN SUDAN ON BLUE NILE STATE

Successive governments in Sudan have viewed Blue Nile state largely in terms of the benefits its resources could provide the national government, with providing public services and increasing the political voice of the people who live there a distant second.[55] Anger about this marginalization grew during the 1980s, in particular in communities that consider themselves to be the indigenous inhabitants of the area, who are collectively called the Funj. This led many Funj to support the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), especially those from the Uduk, Ingessana, Hamaj and Gumuz communities. In contrast, other communities in Blue Nile state sided with Khartoum, including the Fellata, Hausa and many Berta, who often held government positions in Damazin, the capital of Blue Nile state.[56] The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) bought some development and increased political representation to SPLM/A aligned communities but this fell apart in 2011 after South Sudan gained independence. A new war, led by the SPLM/A-North (SPLM/A-N), raged until 2016. A series of ceasefires lasted until the collapse of the National Congress Party (NCP) regime in 2019. During this war, the SPLM/A-N received substantially less support from Ethiopia, the traditional ally for its Blue Nile forces, due to the relatively good relations between Khartoum and Addis at this time.[57]

In 2017, long simmering differences over military and political policies split the SPLM/A-N between the chairperson and commander-in-chief, Malik Agar, and his deputy, Abdelaziz al-Hilu.[58] Most of the movement based in South Kordofan state supported Agar, who hails from the area, while in Blue Nile state support was divided between the two men. Most of Agar's own Ingessana kin supported him, while the majority of the other Funj supported al-Hilu. In May 2017, violence broke out in Blue Nile state between the two sides, with Agar's forces largely driven out of Blue Nile by July. Clashes between the two sides occurred intermittently until the Sudanese revolution in 2019, with Agar's forces confined to South Sudan and small pockets inside Blue Nile state.

When the transitional government started the Juba peace process, Agar's forces joined the negotiations but al-Hilu did not. Signing the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) as the SPLM/A-N SRF (Sudan Revolutionary Front), Agar joined the Sovereign Council and his military deputy, Ahmed al-Omda, became governor of Blue Nile state. Governing proved difficult, which weakened the relationship between the SPLM/A-N (SRF) and their constituents, and saw support for the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu), grow.[59] To compensate for its declining popularity, the SPLM/A-N (SRF) looked to communities such as the Fellata and the Hausa, which had previously been NCP allies and were in search of a new political patron. This constituency was not enough, however, to compensate for losses of support

55 Rift Valley Institute, 'Resistance in the Peripheries', 12–15.

56 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, Blue Nile State, January-April 2024.

57 Rift Valley Institute, 'Resistance in the Peripheries', 10–11.

58 For a detailed look at the split and its impact on the SPLM/A-N and dynamics in Blue Nile state, see: Khalid Amar Hassan, 'Spilling Over: Conflict Dynamics in and around Sudan's Blue Nile State, 2015–19', Human Security Baseline Assessment, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, March 2020, 34–42. Accessed 23 April 2024, https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/HSBA-Report-Sudan-Blue-Nile_0.pdf.

59 Rift Valley Institute, 'Resistance in the Peripheries', 38–39.

elsewhere in Blue Nile state. In part due to this weakened support base, as well as other pragmatic considerations, the SPLM/A-N (SRF) sided with the military wing of the transitional government (Mil-TG) during their October 2021 coup.[60] This left the SPLM/A-N (SRF) politically intact, with Agar still on the Sovereign Council and al-Omda as the governor of Blue Nile state, but also beholden to the Mil-TG.

These political developments also created local tensions. In 2022, SPLM/A-N (SRF) aligned Hausa communities demanded land rights in Roseires and Wad al-Mahi localities. Funj communities, who claim landownership in this area as part of their indigenous rights, saw this emboldened position by the Hausa as a result of the rise of the SPLM/A-N (SRF) that was enabled by the JPA.[61] The SPLM/A-N (SRF) struggled to quell the violence and was unable to resolve the land rights issue. Violence in October 2022 gave the SAF the opportunity to increase their political and economic influence in Blue Nile state, including opening new gold mining operations in Geissan and Wad al-Mahi localities.[62] After the outbreak of the SAF–RSF conflict, the alignment between the SPLM/A-N (SRF) and the SAF remained intact. The SAF commander-in-chief, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, removed Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) as the vice chair of the Sovereign Council and appointed Malik Agar in his place.[63] Blue Nile state then became one of the main SAF recruitment areas.[64] At the same time, as the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) undertook military operations around Kurmuk (in Benishangul-Gumuz region in Ethiopia) from May 2023, the SAF relied on recruits from the Berta community to defend the area.[65] Ingessana and Berta recruitment is being carried out in the context of their long-standing competition for political dominance in Blue Nile state. This has created a contest between Ingessana and Berta leaders, with both carrying out recruitment efforts to demonstrate that that they are worthy of being seen as the most reliable SAF ally.[66]

The SAF–RSF conflict has complicated communal dynamics in Blue Nile state, which the SAF has sought to exploit for its benefit. In addition to providing a rationale for increased mobilization done in such a way that sets the stage for further communal competition (for example, between the Berta and Ingessana), communal divisions have incentivized communities to come out in public support of one side or the other. For instance, unresolved tensions between the Funj and Hausa mean that in Blue Nile some Hausa have come out in support of the RSF, due to SAF support for the Berta.[67] The RSF has also been successful in recruiting from among the Arab pastoralist community in Blue Nile state, with some members playing a leading role in RSF assaults on Gezira and Sennar in mid-December 2023; for example, Abdel-Rahman al-Bishi, who led the force in Gezira.[68] Further complicating these

60 Rift Valley Institute, 'Resistance in the Peripheries', 22–23.

61 Rift Valley Institute, 'Resistance in the Peripheries', 24.

62 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, Blue Nile State, January-April 2024.

63 'El Burhan sacks Hemedti as Sudan TSC V-P, appoints Malik Agar', *Radio Dabanga*, 21 May 2024. Accessed 23 April 2024, https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/el-burhan-sacks-hemedti-as-sudan-tsc-v-p-appoints-malik-agar.

64 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, Blue Nile State, January-April 2024.

65 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, Blue Nile State, January-April 2024.

66 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, Blue Nile State, January-April 2024.

67 On 14 February 2024, the Hausa held a rally in Khartoum and declared general support for the RSF, with a video of the event released through RSF social media channels.

68 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan and Blue Nile State, January-April 2024.

dynamics are the individual choices by community leaders. For instance, Hamaj paramount leader Omda Abu Shotal, a long-time rival of Agar, came out in support of the RSF in mid-2023. So far, however, he has not been able to mobilize large numbers of his kin for the RSF, and most Hamaj either support the SAF or the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu).[69]

While intra-community violence has remained at relatively low levels, many grievances remain unresolved and potential flash points loom. Violence between Funj and Hausa communities started to increase in February 2024 as old unresolved grievances threaten to become further politicized in the context of the SAF–RSF conflict. Furthermore, should the RSF forces currently based in Sennar, which are led by Abu Shotal and al-Bishi (a member of the Rufaa al-Hoy pastoralist community in Blue Nile), reach Blue Nile state, this would likely enable them to recruit more easily from their kin, causing increased localized violence. Thus, the situation in Blue Nile state remains fragile and prone to violence.

BENISHANGUL-GUMUZ REGION AND THE CRISIS IN ETHIOPIA

Since the 1980s, the Benishangul[70] and the Gumuz communities have sought to address their systematic marginalization in Ethiopia.[71] Historically, these two communities were often part of the same political and armed movements. More recently, however, as their interests inside Ethiopia have started to diverge, they have begun to operate separately. For the Gumuz, over the last 20 years interests related to land use and landownership have become more important due to the increase of large-scale development projects in areas the Gumuz consider to be their historical land.[72] These projects include large-scale agricultural projects (often with foreign investments), relocation projects that bring individual subsistence farmers from densely populated (often highland areas) areas to those that the government sees as less densely populated, and hydroelectric projects.[73]

The loss of access to land, coupled with continued political marginalization, has increased Gumuz grievances, which in turn has led to increased tensions between the Gumuz and neighbouring communities and the state government in Assosa. Some Gumuz have directed their anger towards large-scale agricultural institutions and the subsistence farmers relocated from highland communities (especially Amhara and Oromo), all of whom the Gumuz blame for the loss of their land. The violence that erupted was met with corresponding violence and repression from the security forces. The violence peaked just after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali came to power in 2018, with his (at the time)

69 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, Blue Nile State, January-April 2024.

70 The Benishangul are a people who speak the same Berta language as is spoken in Sudan.

71 The Benishangul-Gumuz region was created after 1991, during the reorganization of Ethiopia into an ethnic-federalist state. In part, the region was created to protect and empower five minority indigenous communities living in this part of Ethiopia; see: Sarah Vaughan and Mesfin Gebremichael, 'Resettlement of Gumuz communities around Ethiopia's Blue Nile dam', FutureDAMS working paper 10, Manchester: University of Manchester, July 2020, 8–9. The five minority communities are the Benishangul, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao and Komo. Each groups speaks their own language. The Benishangul live in the Assosa zone, with large numbers also living in the localities of Kurmuk, Geissan and Wad al-Mahi in Blue Nile state. The Gumuz are in Metekel and Kamashi zones in Benishangul-Gumuz region, with smaller numbers of kin in Wad al-Mahi locality in Blue Nile state. The Mao and Komo live in their own special *woreda* (district) in the extreme south-west of the state, along the border with Sudan and South Sudan, while the Shinasha are found through the region. See: Rift Valley Institute, 'Resistance in the Peripheries', 26–27.

72 Jan Nyssen, 'The marginalised Gumuz communities in Metekel (Ethiopian western lowlands)', paper submitted to the HBS Special Issue on the Tigray war (Ethiopia), January 2021.

73 Vaughan and Gebremichael, 'Resettlement of Gumuz communities', 4. Resettlement in Ethiopia as a means to cope with food insecurity in a particular area has a long history dating to the 1980s.

Amhara and Oromo supporters feeling increasingly powerful, such that by 2019, intra-communal political violence was spreading across the region.[74]

Some in the Benishangul community also voiced grievances towards Addis after Abiy came to power, most of whom were from the BPLM. Although they had joined the state government in Assosa in 2013, they subsequently left for Damazin in Blue Nile state by 2019. For the BPLM, their grievances were less about land than about the political changes that Abiy wanted to make to move from ethnic federalism to a centralized state. For those who consider themselves indigenous to a particular region, they see an ethnic federal system, with its extra protections for minority groups, as necessary to protect their rights from the interests of the larger ethnic communities. Otherwise, minority communities feel they will be consistently out voted under a purely non-federal democratic system.[75] Of course, this does not resolve all political differences as there are a number of enduring tensions between and within the five indigenous communities in Benishangul-Gumuz region.

From 2020, both these dissident BPLM members and some Gumuz militias have operated in loose coordination from rear bases in Blue Nile state. The SAF has provided military and monetary support, and, from 2021, facilitated links with the TPLF.[76] By this time, the Gumuz militias based in Sudan were operating largely under the leadership of the charismatic al-Tahir Tigre. SAF support led to increased military capacity for both groups, with the Gumuz militias having larger numbers and more military capacity. Neither group, however, was able to challenge state power in Ethiopia, as SAF support remained at a minimal level—the provision of small arms but no vehicles or heavy weapons.[77] This is likely because the SAF was more interested in signalling their potential capacity to disrupt a key geographic region in exchange for negotiation concessions on other critical areas (such as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam [GERD] or Fashaga), rather than engage in a large-scale proxy war the outcomes of which would be harder to determine.

Following the warming of relations between the SAF and Addis in the latter half of 2022, the BPLM members based in Damazin negotiated with the government in Assosa, and some of its leaders joined the government in early 2023. The BPLM agreement was done in conjunction with their SAF patrons, who were interested in both demonstrating goodwill towards Addis and having allies in the Assosa government. At the same time, the BPLM had aligned itself with the TPLF as part of the broader anti-Addis coalition, so as the TPLF had come to terms with Addis, it made sense for the BPLM to find a settlement as well.[78]

In early 2023, the relationship between the BPLM and the government in Assosa got off to a rocky start just as it had in 2013 when BPLM leaders joined the Assosa government then. There were clashes between the BPLM and regional security forces during the integration process, and a few months later, at least a dozen BPLM members, including senior figures were arrested, with most still in prison

74 Rift Valley Institute, 'Resistance in the Peripheries', 31.

75 Rift Valley Institute, 'Resistance in the Peripheries', 31.

76 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan and Blue Nile State, January-April 2024.

77 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan Blue Nile State, January-April 2024.

78 The coalition is called the United Front of Ethiopian Federalist and Confederalist Forces (UFEFCF). In addition to the TPLF and the BPLM, the UFEFCF includes: Oromo Liberation Army, Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front, Agaw Democratic Movement, Gambella Peoples Liberation Army, Global Kimant People Rights and Justice Movement/Kimant Democratic Party, Sidama National Liberation Front and Somali State Resistance.

as of early 2024.[79] Eventually Assosa reconciled with BPLM military leader Abdul-Wahab Mahadi, who became a senior leader at the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) regional office in April 2023. Since his return to Assosa, Abdul-Wahab has spearheaded regional security force efforts to weaken hold out opposition groups, including the Gumuz militias based in the Sudanese borderlands.

While the BPLM was making its deal, the Gumuz militias largely stayed in the Sudanese borderlands. The Gumuz militias faced several challenges in 2022, including the loss of their overt patron, the SAF, which stopped military and monetary support to the group. In addition, al-Tahir Tigre, under whose leadership most of the militias were aligned, died in April 2022. Finally, due to the close kinship between Gumuz and some Funj groups, the former were caught up in the Hausa–Funj violence in 2022 in which dozens (but likely hundreds) of Gumuz who had fled the violence inside Ethiopia were killed.[80] These challenges served to reduce the military effectiveness of the Gumuz militias and shifted some of their attention away from Assosa and towards intra-communal dynamics inside Sudan. In the current context, neither the SAF nor Addis are weaponizing their allies in the Blue Nile–Benishangul-Gumuz borderlands. Crucially, however, the potential for escalation remains if the relationship between the SAF and Addis shifts again. Moreover, the Gumuz militias are tied up in local Blue Nile conflicts, while the BPLM is focused on Benishangul-Gumuz politics and competition for control over the local administration.

At the same time, there is no clear path towards resolving Gumuz grievances, which are wrapped up in complicated dynamics dealing with identity, politics, landownership and state-led development projects. The disparate nature of Gumuz political forces (both armed and unarmed) means that even if the governments in Addis or Assosa are willing to engage in negotiations concerning increased political representation, there is no one actor or entity that could negotiate on behalf of all these Gumuz movements.[81] For instance, since 2021, there have been several peace agreements signed between the government and the Gumuz People's Democratic Movement (GPDM), which claims to be negotiating on behalf of Gumuz interests, with the most recent agreement signed in November 2023.[82] These peace deals have not held[83] as this group does not represent the militias in the Sudanese borderlands.[84] Other political movements from the Gumuz areas of Benishangul-Gumuz region also raise objections to political concessions being given to armed groups that come to power through agreements and not elections.[85] As such, little is done to meet varied grievances of the Gumuz community, violence remains and those in power in Assosa can continue to avoid addressing the root causes and grievances that lead to violence.

79 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, eastern Sudan, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Blue Nile State, January-April 2024.

80 Rift Valley Institute, 'Resistance in the Peripheries', 39.

81 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, Benishangul-Gumuz and Blue Nile State, January-April 2024.

82 'Minority rights dilemma exemplifies Ethiopia's brutal identity crisis', Ethiopia Insight, 11 March 2023. Accessed 23 April 2024, https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2023/03/11/minority-rights-dilemma-exemplifies-ethiopias-brutal-identity-crisis/ and 'EPO Weekly: 11-17 November 2023', Ethiopia Peace Observatory, 22 November 2023. Accessed 23 April 2024, https://epo.acleddata.com/2023/11/22/epo-weekly-11-17-november-2023/.

83 This is seen in repeated attempts to agree settlements with the same group over and over. Also see: Ethiopia Peace Observatory, 'Minority rights dilemma'.

84 Researcher observations and confidential interviews with local community leaders and local government officials, Benishangul-Gumuz and Blue Nile State, January-April 2024.

85 Tsegaye Birhanu, 'The spiraling situation in Ethiopia's Benishangul-Gumuz region', Ethiopia Insight, 18 June 2021. Accessed 23 April 2024, https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/06/18/the-spiraling-situation-in-ethiopias-benishangul-gumuz-region/.

CONCLUSION

Geopolitics in the Horn of Africa has entered a particularly turbulent time as national, regional and communal tensions are highly agitated. The conflict context since 2023 has drawn the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Asmara closer as they resist both Rapid Support Forces (RSF) efforts and the Abiy regime in Addis, with their Gulf ally seeking to exert regional dominance. The SAF remains concerned about Ethiopian support for the RSF as Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) share a common patron in Abu Dhabi. Similarly, as relations between Addis and Asmara deteriorated, Eritrea continues to work against the emergence of a strong central Ethiopian state by offering support to local armed resistance groups. The SAF and Asmara are united in their shared preference for a weak and domestically preoccupied Addis, so are working to ensure that Addis does not support the RSF militarily, which would sway the regional balance of power.

Long-term marginalization makes borderland communities especially vulnerable to alliances of convenience. With few options to seek redress, supporting the military or political objectives of a more powerful actor becomes an appealing choice to secure their own interests. National actors use local communities to pursue their own interests, arming and then demobilizing them as it suits the national conflict context, setting off further grievances and leaving fundamental questions about access to political and economic power largely unresolved.

In eastern Sudan, where the political and identity-related grievances between Beja and Bani Amer communities remain unaddressed, some Beja see support for SAF war efforts against the RSF as a way to create conditions for future political benefits. In contrast, some Bani Amer who are concerned a poor relationship with the SAF and Eritrea could negatively affect their interests have sought to come to at least a short-term settlement with both. Long term, however, neither of these communities feel their grievances are really being addressed.

In Blue Nile state in Sudan and Benishangul-Gumuz region in Ethiopia, grievances remain unresolved and questions around political representation are unaddressed, while competition between these communities continues or increases. In Blue Nile, Ingessana and Berta competition for political dominance in the state has led both communities to support SAF recruitment efforts in order to demonstrate which one is the most reliable SAF ally. The localized fracturing has been more intense in Blue Nile state as communities are split between the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army-North Sudan Revolutionary Front (SPLM/A-N SRF) and SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu). They are also further divided by support for the SAF or the RSF. In Ethiopia, while the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM) have rejoined the Ethiopian federal state administration in Assosa, the Gumuz militias remain in the Blue Nile borderlands in Sudan without a pathway to overcome their marginalization. Their current lack of overt support from their Sudanese patron, the SAF, combined with the disparate nature of Gumuz political forces (both armed and unarmed), compounds the situation.

Overall, these dynamics highlight a period of intense instability in the Horn region. While the borderlands are often considered peripheral to national conflicts, the current context has drawn these peripheries into the contestations for power over the central state, with national and international political interest. The likelihood of increased violence is high, while the potential for the resolution of decades of marginalization remains low.

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS, WORDS AND PHRASES

ASF	Amhara Special Forces
BPLM	Benishangul People's Liberation Movement
Civ-TG	Civilian Transitional Government
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
EDF	Eritrean Defence Forces
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
ESPA	Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
GERD	Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam
JPA	Juba Peace Agreement
Mil-TG	Military Transitional Government
nazir	(*Arabic*) paramount leader of a community
NCP	National Congress Party
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NIF	National Islamic Front
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SRF	Sudan Revolutionary Front
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
SPLM/A	Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army
SPLM/A-N	Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army-North
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UFEFCF	United Front of Ethiopian Federalist and Confederalist Forces

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