

# THE WAR ON TIGRAY: GEOPOLITICS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SELF-DETERMINATION

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## Abstract

Tigray continues to be a unique case among ancient kingdoms, Westphalia nation-states, post-colonial Africa, and post-Cold War national liberation struggles. It is one of the oldest civilizations (Aksumite Kingdom) and the historical, cultural, and political soul of ancient and modern Ethiopia. But it was made to be an ‘oppressed nation struggling for regional autonomy and survival from genocidal aggression’ by the empire state of Ethiopia and the ‘garrison state’ of Eritrea. It also survived Egyptian and Mahdist expansionists, and Italian colonialism, though it lost ‘Bahre-Negash’ (Eritrea) to Italy due to the Wuchale Agreement (or Treaty of Wichale) in 1889. Eritrea was handed over to Italian colonialists by Menelik II of Shewa-Amhara in order to weaken Tigray’s geopolitical power base. Tigray was also the hotbed of the first Woyane rebellion in 1943 which sparked the idea of ‘land to the Tiller, fair taxation, and self-rule,’ and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) led the second Woyane rebellion (1975–91) that restructured the empire state of Ethiopia into a federation with the 1995 constitution. Since 2018, after 27 years of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)-led federal experiment, Tigray again became a victim of a ‘genocidal war’ led by the Ethiopian federal army, Amhara forces, Ethiopian regional forces, and Eritrean army, supported by UAE and Turkey drones, and the Somali army. The international community and the African Union supported Abiy Ahmed and Issaias Afewerki’s genocidal war in the name of “maintaining the territorial integrity of Ethiopia” by neglecting the principles of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), people’s self-determination rights, and the prevention of genocide. Tigray, therefore, is a rare case in the vicious cycle of violence. The Tigrayan ‘two-year’ survival war (from November 2020 to November 2022) against those who practice genocide was destined to break Tigray’s historically vicious cycle of violence perpetrated by Ethiopia and Eritrea. The paper aims to investigate the historical, geopolitical, and security reasons that have trapped Tigray into facing the post-2020 genocidal war.

## Keywords

*genocidal war, geopolitics, Tigray liberation struggle, TDF, referendum*

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*“The (Ethiopian) military rulers failed in one of their principal missions: the preservation of the state’s territorial unity. The Ethiopian state was historically forged by war, and by war it has been broken up.”* Professor Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa*, 2009: 6.

*“Tigray elects”, “Tigray will prevail”, and “Tigray will decide its destiny via referendum” – The legendary slogans of the people of Tigray during “the historic regional election held in September 2020; two years’ armed resistance against the genocidal war; and the Tigray’s quest for referendum respectively.*

## **1. Introduction**

On November 4, 2020, the federal government, in alliance with the Eritrean army, Amhara expansionists, and other Ethiopian regional special forces, collectively known as the “Joint Forces,” declared war on Tigray. The Tigray War has been branded as the largest and deadliest conflict (Merewe, 2022) in the world in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was notable because of the scale of human rights atrocities committed by the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF), Amhara regional forces, Afar regional forces, and the special forces of other Ethiopian regional states in Ethiopia against Tigray regional forces. The magnitude of death has been reported to be nearly one million Tigrayan (Ibid). The Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) were engaged in the war to defend Tigray’s rights to self-rule and self-determination, restore Tigray’s territorial integrity, and confront existential threats posed by the two-year genocidal war declared by the Joint Forces (Gebrewahd, September 2022; Plaut, March 2021). Geopolitically, the war on Tigray, alongside the war on Ukraine, is a recent example of geopolitical rivalries between superpowers: the USA on one side, and China and Russia on the other. At the outset of the Tigray conflict, key UN Security Council (UNSC) members, including UN Secretary-General António Guterres and African Union Commissioner Moussa Faki, sided with the Ethiopian government against Tigray, citing territorial integrity and sovereignty while downplaying the unprecedented atrocities committed by the Joint Forces (Girmay, 2022). Russia and China consistently supported the Ethiopian government’s war on Tigray and repeatedly vetoed UNSC resolutions aimed at stopping the conflict. Western powers, however, eventually shifted their stance, calling for a cessation of hostilities, unhindered humanitarian access, and an end to the de facto two-year siege, and finally declared that war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing were committed in Tigray by the Joint Forces (Blinken, March 2023). Additionally, regional powers such as Turkey, Iran, the UAE, and China supplied support to the Ethiopian federal government during the conflict (Roblin, November 2021; Zwijneburg, January 2022).

Furthermore, the war on Tigray was also a new case in Africa where modern technologies, including war drones from the UAE, Iran, Turkey, and China, were employed and changed the course of the war by weakening the armaments of the

Tigrayan forces (Ibid). The war has also used siege and blockage and Humanitarian Aid (food and medicine) as a major weapon of war and human security crisis.

What makes the war on Tigray unique is that the Ethiopian federal government, which was expected to protect its own citizens from human rights violations, human security threats, and external aggression, instead formed a “tripartite joint force” with Eritrea and Amhara regional forces. This coalition aimed to annihilate Tigrayans and jointly occupied the Tigray region. Moreover, Eritrea’s participation in the war has resulted in the worst human rights violations, human security crises, as well as geopolitical crises (Tronvoll & Martin, 2021; UN News, 2021).

Though the African Union continues to claim an “African solution to African problems” and “Never again to the Rwanda genocide mantra” (Figuremariam, 2008), the Union was believed by many to have a very sluggish endeavour to stop the war against Tigray. The international community’s complicity that failed to stop the two years’ war clearly exposed the African Union’s and the international community’s geopolitical primacy of superpowers and regional powers over human rights and human security (Ibid).

## **2. Stating the paradoxes of international order: Tigray a new precedent**

Abiy Ahmed and Issaias Afewerki’s war against Tigray (Girmay, 2022; Volodzko, 2022), along with the Ukraine–Russia conflict, continue to dominate international politics, reshaping the global order and contributing to the Horn of Africa’s emerging ‘new (dis)order’ (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). The Ukraine–Russia war has transformed the post-Cold War era’s East-West bloc dynamics and the post-9/11 anti-terrorist narratives into a clear division between a “coalition of democratic communities” and the Russian bloc. This war, characterized by profound implications for global order, significantly impacts both continental and supranational institutions.

The war against Tigray, however, has been between the coalition of the Horn of Africa’s authoritarian regimes, and one of the oldest nations in the world, Tigray, a nation striving for self-determination and struggling to defend its civilization, cultural heritages, and self-determination rights. It was a war between Tigray, a nation zealous to fulfill its vision for the fullest sense of self-determination, and the Joint Forces in collaboration with their international sponsors including UAE, Iran, and Turkey. The fundamental goal of the genocidal war perpetrated by the Joint Forces, as a *final solution* and based on ‘war makes state doctrine’ was to control and partition Tigray’s territory, eliminate the heritage, history, undying patriotism, and political establishments of one of the oldest civilizations in the world, to uproot the critical mass of the people of Tigray, and to destroy the civilization bearing and cohesively surviving nation of Tigray (Ateweberhan, 2020). Finally, their grand strategy was to eradicate the name of Tigray from the map through a three-fold method: redrawing the Horn of Africa’s establishment to fit Issaias Afewerki’s ambition of ‘Eritreanization of the Horn Africa- *reinventing the lost Singapore vision*’ (Ateweberhan, November 2020), to fulfill the ‘Ethiopianization of Eritrea and the Red Sea – *reclaiming “greater Ethiopia” (by the Ethiopian irredentist) which stretches up to*

*the Red Sea,*’ according to Abiy Ahmed and his Amhara elites’ irredentist rhetoric. And, internally, the Amhara elites are desperately hoping to *Amharanize* Ethiopia and then regain their ‘glorious past, i.e. *restoring Menelik II Ethiopia*’ by undoing the Tigrayan federalist nation building legacies. These three visions are mutually antagonistic and utopian in the absence of Tigray (Ibid). Tigray continues to be the unifying factor as it is the historical-cultural ancestor of both states and it is geopolitically situated between the three expansionists forces. Historically and politically, Tigray has been inherently anti-thesis to the assimilationist and expansionist nation-building projects of Issaias, Abiy, and the Amhara elites (Abbay, 2022). The war on Tigray, was thus to control Tigray first, and then project their expansionist policy to the greater Horn of Africa. For the stated visions to be successful, therefore, presumed “eradication of Tigray from the map, structure, history, and memory,” as Daniel Kibret, social advisor of Abiy Ahmed, shamelessly stated on the Ethiopian public media, the same ideas have also been systematically propagated by Abiy Ahmed and Issaias Afewerki.

The war against Tigray exposed the international community and institutions, including the African Union (AU) (ABC News, 2020), which advocates for humanity, popular sovereignty, the responsibility to protect (R2P), genocide watch, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, self-determination, gender violence prevention, and the condemnation of hunger as a weapon of war. Instead of upholding these principles, many either directly supported the war or remained silent in condemning this 21st-century genocide. Even worse, the international community failed to uphold its humanitarian principles, favouring authoritarian regimes under the guise of sovereignty (Gebrewahd, 2022). In the Tigray conflict, these ideals, including insincere statements by UN officials expressing that they were “gravely concerned” (UN News, 2021), have become mere “gentlemen’s jargon” or empty “words of statesmen’s briefings or press releases” that ordinary Tigrayans are tired of hearing. Consequently, the realist doctrine of world politics, emphasizing ‘military power,’ continues to dominate, and the international order remains a state-centric Hobbesian or anarchic establishment.

The Tigray war once again uncovers the ‘strategic mistakes’ of the major powers (USA, Russia and China) in their decisions to deal with the Ethiopian and Eritrean regimes and the genuine struggle of the Tigrayans for self-determination. For geopolitical ends, and without taking the genuine self-determination questions of the Tigrayans and other Ethiopian nations into consideration, the Western powers (mainly the UK and the USA) did their best to save Emperor Haile Selassie from the Tigrayans, first in the Woyane peasants’ protest in 1943, and through many other Ethiopian peasant and student struggles in the 1970s (Tareke, 2009). The former USSR also supported the military Derg regime’s 17 years’ war against the armed liberation struggles in Tigray and Eritrea. Both Ethiopian regimes, nevertheless, were defeated by the freedom fighters that raised the nation’s question of self-determination. The Ethiopian regimes, unfortunately, were at war against Tigray since the formation of modern Ethiopia by Menelik II (Ibid). The superpower’s support

for the monarchical and military regimes also failed to transform Ethiopia into a stable multinational democracy. As history repeats itself, Abiy Ahmed was at war against Tigray and, paradoxically, again Tigray was made a victim of the major powers' support of the regimes of Ethiopia and Eritrea in the name of territorial integrity and regional security.

Following the 1998–2000 Ethiopia–Eritrea war, the Algiers Agreement, signed in December 2000, involved the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), and the US. These entities intervened to save Issaias Afewerki from total defeat by the TPLF-EPRDF-led Ethiopian army under the pretext of safeguarding “territorial integrity,” not the Eritrean people. This intervention resulted in the emergence of an even more oppressive regime in Eritrea. Furthermore, the same actors committed a “strategic mistake” by rehabilitating Issaias from international isolation and lifting UN Security Council sanctions in the name of “rapprochement and regional stability.” This miscalculation enabled Issaias Afewerki to wage genocide on Tigray and destabilize Ethiopia (Gebrewahd, 2018). Similarly, in the name of maintaining Ethiopia's territorial integrity and seeking a negotiated settlement, the AU, UN, EU, USA, and other

drone-sponsoring states saved Abiy Ahmed's federal government from collapse at the hands of the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) in the final months of 2021. The outcome was a repetition of the “Issaias Afewerki syndrome”: Abiy Ahmed's regime became increasingly authoritarian, plunging Ethiopia into the worst crisis it has ever faced.

The aggregate outcomes of the strategic mistakes of the superpowers, regional powers, and the AU are the same; Tigray unfortunately, and repeatedly, is victimized and the ‘Issaias Afewerki syndrome’ proliferates in the Horn of Africa. In the end, Ethiopia and the Horn of African security are, more than ever, becoming extremely volatile, and even the Tigray crisis could lead to a reconfiguration of Ethiopia and beyond. Following the Pretoria agreement signed in November 2022 between the Ethiopian federal government and the TPLF to end the war in Tigray, the crisis

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in Ethiopia transformed into a war between the Ethiopian federal government and Amhara forces of which the latter is allegedly supported by the Eritrean government and hence complicating the vicious cycle of violence in Ethiopia. Moreover, following Abiy Ahmed's official claim in October 2023 to have access to the Red Sea (Eritrean ports), Ethiopia and Eritrea are engaging in a propaganda war which could evolve into a full-scale geopolitical war in the Horn of Africa. Therefore, the Tigray war recalls that the orthodox mechanisms of the superpowers towards Ethiopia have been proven to fail and a fundamentally new mechanism of intervention is needed to address the historical problems of Tigray, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. An internationally observed referendum could be among the options to address Tigray's dilemma. After the atrocities perpetrated against Tigrayans, regardless of whether the people of Tigray will decide 'to remain in Ethiopia' or 'opt for independence,' they should be given the chance to express a 'vote of confidence' on Ethiopia via referendum.

### **3. The irony of pan-Africanism and the African Union against the self-determination of Tigray**

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed continues to pretend to be a champion of pan-Africanism claiming Ethiopia to be, as the host of the African Union, the only country in Africa to escape European colonialism, and supports African independence struggles against colonialism and neocolonialism in mobilizing African leaders in the Tigrayan war. The African Union headquarter, which was built during the time of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, was placed over the notorious Red Terror prison camp of the Derg regime called '*Alem Beqagn*' to remember the victims and condemn crimes of Derg fascism. The Union was chanting the slogan "Never again to Rwandan genocide" annually remembering African resistance struggles that originated from the 1896 victory of Adwa from Tigray. The African Union envisaged by its constitution, determined to reinvent pre-colonial African identities and heritages, to recognize the family as the building block of African states, and rhetorically claim "African solutions to African problems" (Figuremariam, 2008). Unfortunately, the African Union, under commissioner Musa Faqi Mohammed (ABC News, 2020), declared its unwavering support to Abiy Ahmed and Issaias Afewerki's war in Tigray and lobbied members of the UN Security Council to not make the Tigray war an agenda point, nor to pass strong decisions in order to avert the ongoing atrocities. "Furthermore, the Union that had requested the UNSC to impose sanctions on Eritrea in 2009 for its destabilizing role in the Horn of Africa paradoxically turned out to be instrumental in rehabilitating the sanctioned tyranny and opened a Pandora's Box for Issaias Afewerki to destabilize the region (BBC, December 2018). The African Union in Addis Ababa, by supporting the war against Tigray, aggravated Ethiopia's crisis as the internal contradictions were becoming irreconcilable and the geopolitical crises were worsening.

The bold and irrefutable fact is that Tigray has been the origin of Ethiopia's cultural, historical, and religious identity. It has served as the 'software' or 'idea' for the Ethiopian state, the cradle of African patriotism and independence. The timeless

Tigrayan struggle once again exposes the absurdity of the notion that “African solution to African problems” can prevent recurring atrocities in Africa. After ‘Operation Alula’ in June 2021, which led the liberation of most parts of Tigray, the region’s agenda clearly became internationalized. By all standards, Tigray’s struggle for self-defense, self-determination, a referendum, and justice for victims of ‘genocide’ war cannot be reduced to merely Ethiopia’s internal affairs. These issues are too large and complicated to be handled solely by Ethiopia and the African Union. Ultimately, the responsibility fell to the leaders of democratic states who genuinely believe in the self-determination of peoples and nations and recognize that Tigray’s case was a unique and new phenomenon which required new interventions and a new conflict transformation framework.

#### **4. Tigray: Victim of the Horn of Africa authoritarian regimes and their assimilationist nation-building resurrection**

Ethiopia and Eritrea’s war against Tigray was waged in the name of the “state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and nonintervention” mantra and the hypocrisy of “the Horn of Africa’s regional integration” even though Abiy Ahmed, Issaias Afewerki, and Mohammed Formajo had no ‘legitimacy and capacity’ to execute such a huge regional project (Ateweberhan, 2020). The Tigray war was a new litmus test where the territorial integrity and sovereignty in Ethiopia and Eritrea were mockery ideals against the Tigrayan genuine self-determination struggle. Eritrea, which has been repeatedly called the African North Korea (Stavis & Parkinson, 2016) violates Ethiopia’s sovereignty indefinitely, and even after the Pretoria agreement, Eritrea continues to control Tigray’s territory even though the agreement calls for Eritrea’s withdrawal from Ethiopia’s Tigray territories. Thus, Ethiopia lost both moral and politico-security power to restrain Issaias Afewerki’s hegemonic ambitions. The Eritrean army committed unparalleled atrocities against the Tigrayan people, who are supposed to be citizens of Ethiopia. Shockingly, the Ethiopian government not only condoned but also celebrated Eritrea’s atrocities in Tigray, a member state of the Ethiopian federation. More than ever, Ethiopia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity were compromised, making its international borders vulnerable to violations by neighbouring states including Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, and the violent extremist organization Al-Shabab. The Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), which was known as an African peacemaker, are now implicated in war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing against its own citizens in Tigray. The Tigray people, too weak to fight back external invaders, found themselves defenceless against the onslaught. Meanwhile, the ENDF struggled to control the proliferating insurgencies and youth militant groups found everywhere in the country except in Addis Ababa. This situation epitomizes the characteristics of a fragile and failed state (Weldegiorgis, 2018), as described in the words, “things fall apart, and the center cannot hold.”

The surprising aspect is that Ethiopia accepted violations of its territory by Eritrea, Sudan, and South Sudan. Ethiopia openly acknowledged that the primary objective of the collaboration between Abiy Ahmed and Issaias was to suppress

Tigray. Both leaders were committed to exert control over Tigray and eliminate its ‘historical-cultural-religious origins and legacies.’ Issaias Afewerki openly branded his aggression as “game over” and “*politica-Hisbo*” (political cleaning). Ultimately, their goal was to graft the nightmarish ‘greater Ethiopia’ and ‘greater Eritrea’ onto the ashes of Tigray (Al-mukhatar, 2018; Fisher & Gebrewahd, 2018).

The Tigrayan patriotic war has once again underscored the futility of the “Tigray-phobic,” assimilationist-expansionist, and anti-self-determination nation-building agendas projected by Ethiopian and Eritrean leaders. These genocidal wars waged against Tigray were doomed to fail from the outset, as the historical and cultural foundations of both states originate from Tigray. The military and diplomatic support mobilized from external powers by both states in the name of territorial integrity, regional security, statehood, and geopolitics to eradicate Tigray from the map, history, and structures can only prolong Tigray’s liberation struggle and worsen the security and politico-economic collapse in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the Horn. Issaias Afewerki’s Eritrea and Abiy Ahmed-Amhara elites’ of Ethiopia proved to be ‘typical predatory African states’ impossible of economic and political reforms (regardless of international donor’s efforts), suffering from chronic regime security crises, overly militarized societies, religious and ethnic polarization, and the states’ survival being dependent on the ironfisted leadership. Economic support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the superpower’s and the regional powers combined, did not change the attitude and capacity of either leader to reform their regimes. In the medium and longer term, even if the ‘regimes change’ option is taken off the table by donors, the financial handouts will not avert ‘regime and state collapse, debt quagmire, and genocidal atrocities’ in the region.

Ethiopia was named as an ‘anchor and regional power’ in the Horn of Africa. Abiy Ahmed was untimely groomed as an ‘African reformer’ by those who failed to understand the complexity and fragility of Ethiopian politics. He became a winner of the “Noble Peace Prize” (Verhoeven & Woldemariam, 2022) for making peace with Eritrea in 2019. In November 2020, jointly with Eritrea and Amhara forces, he declared war on Tigray. Since July 2023, Abiy Ahmed’s federal army has been fighting against Amhara forces and in October 2023 he announced a propaganda war against Eritrea through reclaiming access to the Red Sea. The Tigray war starkly revealed that Abiy Ahmed’s Ethiopia, alongside his propaganda machinery “ESAT,” despite being a nation of over 100 million people, failed to effectively transition from conflict to peace. The rhetoric and campaign of mobilizing Ethiopians to eradicate the “5 million Tigrayans,” under the guise of the “95% to 5%” motto and the “drain the sea”(Tghat, 2021) strategy, proved to be militarily, diplomatically, and politically inadequate. This exposed the fragility of Ethiopia’s statehood, exacerbated by the polarization and militarization fueled by ‘assimilationist, secessionist, irredentist, and federalist’ tensions (Gebrewahd, 2019).

June 2021, when the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) executed the decisive ‘Operation Alula Abanega,’ obliterating more than seven divisions of the Ethiopian army in the lowlands of Temben, near the birthplace of Adwa Ras Alula Abanega, a revered



hero of the 1896 battle, and subsequently routing the retreating Ethiopian and Amhara forces at the towns of Weldia, Chifra, Dessie, and Kombelcha up to the Debreseina fronts, the TDF's advance towards Addis Ababa via the Amhara and Afar regions sent shockwaves through the Abiy regime and across Ethiopia. (Chulov, 2021). The determination, resilience, and patriotism of the Tigrayan fighters to defend their fatherland and defeat the aggressors forced Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the international community to rethink and recognize the place of Tigray in Ethiopia and the Horn as a pivotal political and military entity. Following the victorious military assertion of the TDF, including controlling the cities of Kombelcha and Dessie, the Ethiopian government conceded that the ENDF alone could not withstand TDF advancement on Addis Ababa. Consequently, the Ethiopian people were called upon to mass mobilize against the TDF, and the survival of the federal army depended on external support from Turkey, China, and the UAE, particularly through drone assistance. External powers' diplomatic and military support (including the mentioned drones) saved the Joint Forces from total defeat, similar to Mengistu Hailemariam's fate in 1991. Subsequently, this led to the 'strategic withdrawal' of the TDF and externally imposed 'Mutually Hurting Stalemate' (MHS) or 'no war, no peace deadlock' since December 2021. Present-day Ethiopia is repeatedly likened to an 'African Yugoslavia,' situated between the 'failed state' of Somalia and the North Korea of Africa, namely, Eritrea. Abiy Ahmed (equated with Slobodan Milosevic of Yugoslavia and Mikhail Gorbachev of the USSR) continues to say that Ethiopia will not be dismembered.

The Ethiopian saying 'Ethiopia without Tigray is unthinkable' again reiterates that Ethiopia without Tigray is simply historically, religiously, and politically incompatible. Against the expectations of procedural democracy and campaigners, the rhetoric of the federal army and the Amhara forces, the alliance failed to deliver democracy, development, or to uphold territorial integrity. Ethiopia's sovereignty is externally vulnerable and internally divisible between the federal army, the Somali irredentist, Balkanizing Southern nationalities, armed self-determination forces in Oromia, Tigray, Agew, Kimant, Afar, Gambela, Benshangul-Gumuz, and Amhara expansionist forces (Rowe & Gebrewahd, 2021).

##### **5. 'Neo-Ethiopianism', 'Barbarianism' and religious fiasco in post-2020 Ethiopia**

The traditional axioms: "Ethiopia stretches its hands to God," "Ethiopia's name is mentioned several times in the holy bible," and "Ethiopia is the first country in Africa

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where Islam and Christianity harmoniously coexist” are typically becoming socially and religiously inconsequential (Abraha, 2022). The Tigray genocide exposed that Ethiopian religious and cultural values were deteriorating to the unprecedented level of ‘barbarianism,’ and as a result, the religious institutions lost their legitimacy and integrity. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church with its bishops in the synods, categorically supported the war against Tigray and many of them were in the battlefield to mobilize the ENDF (Tghat, 2020). A bishop in the Amhara regional state declared to his followers that “it would be better to be governed by Satan than governed by the Woyane-Tigrayans” (Menberu & Chothia, 2021). The Ethiopian Catholic, Muslim, and protestant leaders also supported the war against Tigray (Theodros, 2022).

The Amhara elites publicly, notably by British Citizen Amhara Andargachew Tsiege, called Ethiopians in general and the Amhara, in particular, to attack Tigrayans with “the cruelest act of barbarism” by saying, “You must be merciless; you must act beyond what our [ethnic] Amhara or Ethiopian cultural values permit” (Abdi, 2021). He further called his followers to take barbaric actions: “... by showing no mercy, without any hesitation, with all means necessary, we should confront them with barbaric cruelty, with barbaric cruelty” (Plaut, 2021). Debebe Eshetu, a prominent Ethiopian journalist and artist, requested Abiy Ahmed to preemptively eradicate the Woyane (Tigrayan) and stated that such action is religiously permissible: “let’s eat hyenas and then repent” (Gebremeskel, 2022). Furthermore, an Amhara businessman named Worku Aytenew also publicly mobilized his supporters by saying, “let’s eat the Woyane like a roasted meat” (Tghat, 2021). As a result of such barbaric campaigns by dominantly Amhara religious and business leaders, intellectuals and artists, the Ethiopian government continues to destroy Ethiopian social and religious fabrics. Unprecedentedly, Ethiopia is engulfed in religious, communal, and ethnic conflicts and the state is overwhelmed by armed forces. Worst of all, Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopian religious leaders, and Amhara elites have been waging media propaganda and dehumanizing campaigns against Tigrayans labelling them as “weeds, cancers, day-hyenas, traitors, terrorists, anti-Ethiopianists and many more” (Collins, 2021). Many Tigrayans from all walks of life in different parts of Ethiopia were forced into humiliating imprisonments in concentration camps, cold-blooded killings, including being burned alive, being fired from their workplaces, and having their properties and businesses plundered. Therefore, Ethiopia was at war in Tigray to destroy its religious origins, including the “Aksum massacre” (Amnesty International, February 2021), Al-Negashi mosques and the destruction of several other significant pieces of the Tigrayan heritage.

## **6. Tigray: victim of Horn of Africa geopolitics and security complex**

The Horn of Africa is one of the hotspots for superpowers, Middle Eastern regional powers, and Eastern African geopolitical, geo-cultural, and geostrategic security complexes. As it is situated between the Red Sea, the Babel Mandab Strait, and the Nile River, the region continues to be a hotbed of geopolitics, hydro politics, and religious conflicts manifested in terrorist proliferation and socially protracted conflicts

(Clapham, 1998). Furthermore, the states in the Horn range from the failed state of Somalia, unrecognized Somaliland, closed and isolated Eritrea, and fragile and conflict-stricken Ethiopia. The states in the region are also mutually interventionist by hosting their neighbouring country's insurgence groups. The strength of one state increases the fragility of its neighbours. As a proxy centre for the geopolitical, hydro-security, religious and inter-state conflicts quagmire the Horn of Africa and beyond, Tigray became a victim of genocidal aggression. Ethiopia, therefore, became a pace-maker of geopolitical catastrophe as the Ethiopian government invited regional and international rivals to, directly and indirectly, become involved in the Tigray war and repeat the history of former Ethiopian regimes in treason against Tigray. As a result, though Tigray continues to be devastated without precedent, the timeless Tigrayan patriotic war, after the game-changing operation Alula Abanega equally tarnished Ethiopia's economic, diplomatic, political, and military image. Hence, Ethiopia became a new burden to Africa and the world.

### **7. The quest for self-determination of Tigray via referendum as a conflict transformation mechanism**

Tigray holds a proud historical legacy as the ancient homeland of one of the oldest kingdoms, encompassing a literate civilization spanning the Da'amite, Yeha, and Aksumite Kingdoms. It stands as the first region to embrace the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As a political, cultural, and territorial entity, Tigray has endured and persevered through numerous international aggressions across epochs, including encounters with Egyptian expansion, Mahdist invasions, Italian colonialism in the 19th century, and Eritrean hostilities in 1990-1991, 1998-2000, and 2020-2022. Furthermore, internally, Tigray has been struggling against Shoa-Amhara assimilation and expansion, patriotically preserved its political existence, and waged a successful armed liberation struggle (from 1975-1991) to transform the feudal empire of Ethiopia into a multinational federation, *and as a last resort*, to address its historical "national and class" contradictions. As a result of the historical ups and downs, the oldest nation of Tigray, unlike other parallel civilizations, turned out to be an 'oppressed nation' within the empire state of Ethiopia (Rowe and Gebrewahd, 2021).

After 27 years of relatively stable political and economic developments, successful engagements in African peacekeeping operations under the TPLF-EPRDF leadership, with the coming of Abiy Ahmed and Amhara expansionist to power in April 2018, Tigray again became a victim of the Neo-Ethiopianist assimilationist policy. The Ethiopian government systematically framed its policies of segregation and humiliation of Tigrayans from all walks of life by labelling them as weeds, cancers, day-hyenas, traitors, contrabandists, terrorists, and anti-Ethiopianist.' Abiy Ahmed defined Tigray as a common enemy to his 'neo-greater Ethiopia' project and mobilized Ethiopians and Eritreans to crack down on the Tigrayan.

Recognizing the clear resurgence of imperialist sentiments under Abiy Ahmed's leadership, coupled with the glorification of past regimes such as Menelik II, Haile

Selassie, and the Derg, while marginalizing the significant contributions of Tigray during the previous 27 years, the people of Tigray, led by the TPLF, initiated legal and political campaigns. These efforts aimed to demand respect for constitutional norms, the acknowledgment of self-rule and self-determination rights of nations, and an end to genocidal campaigns targeting Tigrayans. Defiantly chanting “Tigray bows only to God,” they stood firm in their resolve to uphold their dignity and rights (North Media network, December 2018).

When the federal government illegally extended the 2020-Ethiopian national election, Tigray fiercely opposed the move and responded by establishing its own “Tigray Electoral Commission” by the proclamation 351/2012 to conduct the “Tigray regional council election” under the famous motto “Tigray Elects” (ትግራይ ትመርጥ!) (Addis Standard, September 2020). The author of this article was among the ‘five commissioners’ of the Tigray electoral commission. The election was fundamentally an expression of ‘defiance and rejection’ by Tigray people against any forms of unitary restorationist polices aimed at undermining Tigray’s hard-won self-rule and self-determination rights stated in the Federal 1995 constitution. The election, where approximately 2.78 million Tegaruu voted, was considered as a referendum and the people of Tigray were unprecedentedly mobilized to make the election successful despite the COVID pandemic. Therefore, independently organizing regional elections was considered a minimum right of self-determination (Marks and Dahir, September 2020).

Following the election, the newly elected Tigray regional government was established by the TPLF on October 24, 2020. After a month, the federal government declared war on Tigray in the name of “Law enforcement operation” (Ahmed, November 2020) that resulted in the genocidal war against Tigray. In the eight-month occupation by Ethiopian and Eritrean armies, Tigray faced unspeakable genocidal atrocities. The author of this paper is an eye witness to the genocidal aggression. He was in the battle fields in Tigray, where he fortunately survived life-threatening attacks in the field, from the beginning of the aggression in November 2020 to the operation Alula and the liberation of Mekelle on June 28, 2021.

As a result, on one hand, the author personally observed the unprecedented magnitude of the aggression, the level of armaments used to annihilate Tigray, the brutality of the invaders to eliminate Tigray entirely, and the failure of the international community to avert the genocidal atrocities. On the other hand, the author also witnessed the heroic, resilient, patriotic determination of the people of Tigray and the TDF (both the *gedeli* and new generation of Tigrayan freedom fighters). Together they faced off against the massive Eritrean and Ethiopian armies in the cherished valleys and mountains of Tigray. This steadfast resistance reiterated the historical truth that Tigray stands as a bastion of independence and patriotism, serving as a timeless reminder that it is the graveyard of aggressors. The author also personally confirmed the old saying that “Tigray has not many friends but our freedom and patriotism relies on our valleys and mountains” (Plaut, March 2021). The legal, political, and armed struggles and sacrifices of Tigray boldly herald that Tigray’s right to self-rule

and self-determination was not compromised by any external political forces in any situation. The federal nation-building experiment of Ethiopia, which was enveloped out of 17 years of Tigrayan struggle, was considered the last attempt to democratize the age-old empire state of Ethiopia: *Amharanized-Ethiopia*, on the basis of ‘equality and unity.’

Cognizant of the historical treasons that Ethiopian rulers committed against Tigray; the timeless sacrifices of the Tigrayan people to defend Ethiopia; the ongoing genocidal war to eliminate “Tigray from map, history and memory as a final solution” (Daniel, September 2021), and the undying patriotic struggles of the Tigrayan to defeat the genocidal war and give a lasting solution to the vicious cycle of violence, boldly signals that the relationship between Tigray and Ethiopia is transformed to unprecedented level of contradictions with no possibilities to heal the genocidal atrocities as well as cultural and structural violence. The only option that remains on the table by international mediators to save Ethiopia from dismemberment and peacefully address the Tigray’s vicious problems is to allow Tigray to determine its fate through an internationally observed referendum. The new Tigray (post-2018) is fundamentally evolving to its destiny: from “Tigray elects” (in Tigrigna, Tigray official language-ትግራይ ትመርፅ!) to “Tigray prevails” (-ትግራይ ትስዕር!), and finally, the people of Tigray will continue to proudly herald: “Tigray decides its fate via referendum” (ትግራይ ትዉስን!). Tigray’s fundamental interests are more crystal clear than ever before: Self-defense (maintaining and modernizing TDF); restoring Tigray’s territorial integrity; self-determination via internationally observed referendum; reconstruction and building a secure and democratic Tigray; bringing genociders to justice; and receiving compensation (Gebrewahd, 2022).

## 8. Tigray and the post-Pretoria agreement dilemma

After two years of genocidal war and humanitarian siege, Tigray authorities signed the “Pretoria agreement” titled “permanent cessation of hostilities” with the Ethiopian federal government in Pretoria, South Africa, on November 2, 2022, brokered by the USA, EU, African Union, Kenya and South Africa. The main tenants of the agreement were “securing a permanent cessation of hostilities, DDR of the Tigrayan troops, restoration of Tigray territory as per the FDRE constitution, and unfettered humanitarian access to Tigray” (Permanent Cessation of Hostilities, November 2022). The deal also outlines an interim process before fresh elections are to be conducted in the Tigray regional state to facilitate a new regional assembly and political representation in Ethiopian federal institutions (Tronvoll and Meressa, 2022).

The implementation of the Pretoria peace agreement, however, faces significant challenges across various fronts. Of particular concern is the ongoing presence of Eritrean and Amhara military forces in Tigray, leading to continued violations of human rights and endangering the fragile peace. Despite Tigray’s fulfillment of its commitment to Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) the TDF forces, the Ethiopian government has failed to honor its obligations under the Pretoria agreement. These include the restoration of occupied western and

southern Tigray territories, the repatriation of Tigrayan internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their pre-war homes, the reinstatement of Tigray's representation in federal institutions, and the organization of regional elections in Tigray to reinstate constitutional order. Furthermore, the federal government has yet to officially demand the withdrawal of Amhara and Eritrean forces, identified in the agreement as non-ENDF forces, from Tigray's territory (Permanent Cessation of Hostilities, November 2022). Contrary to the Pretoria agreement, the federal government also announced, in November 2023, that the fate of western and southern Tigray's occupied territories will be determined through referendum though the Tigray interim government fiercely opposed the move. Moreover, humanitarian aid to Tigray has been cut off, despite the agreement stipulating unfettered access for such aid. These challenges collectively cast doubt on the durability of the Pretoria agreement and make the pursuit of lasting peace in the region seem elusive.

Moreover, conducting elections under the current political context may prove counterproductive to restoring a legitimate and just political order. More fundamentally, the agreement failed to officially recognize Eritrea's involvement in Tigray and to hold it accountable for the Eritrean army's genocidal atrocities committed in Tigray. The accountability for war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and rape was undermined by the international court of justice. Instead, the agreement stated that an African transitional justice mechanism would be employed to ensure accountability. However, Tigrayans opposed this, as they felt that the African Union had sided with the Ethiopian government during the war. The agreement also failed to address the key issue of the Tigray referendum, which was the primary motivation for many Tigrayans to fight. Consequently, Tigrayans perceive the agreement as a legal instrument used by the US and African Union to undermine Tigray's two-year struggle for self-determination in favor of Ethiopia's territorial integrity, despite Ethiopia's commission of war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and rape. As a result, Tigrayans are compelled to coexist with an Ethiopian regime that declared war and committed grave human rights atrocities, further jeopardizing the prospects of lasting peace in Ethiopia.

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## 9. Conclusion

The war on Tigray has been characterized as the largest, most concealed, and deadliest conflict in Africa's 21st-century history. This genocidal campaign against Tigray has starkly exposed the international community and institutions, including the African Union, UN, and superpowers, all of which advocate for principles such as humanity, popular sovereignty, responsibility to protect (R2P), genocide prevention, war crimes accountability, ethnic cleansing prevention, crimes against humanity prevention, the "never again" to genocide slogan, self-determination, gender violence prevention, and the prohibition of hunger as a weapon of war. The above-mentioned actors either directly supported the war or remained silent to condemn this 21st-century genocidal war. Even worse, unlike in the case of Russia's war in Ukraine and other humanitarian international law practices, "humanitarian aids" and "humanitarian corridors" were employed as instruments of genocidal war in Tigray and the international community failed to uphold its humanitarian principles and practices in favour of authoritarian regime sovereignty. Tigray, drawing on its historical resilience against external aggression and internal conflicts driven by Ethiopian government policies of expansion and assimilation, stood patriotically and steadfastly throughout the two-year genocidal war and siege imposed by the joint forces of ENDF, EDF, Amhara expansionists, and Afar forces. However, despite its endurance, the fundamental issues plaguing Ethiopia, including irreconcilable nation-building narratives, authoritarianism, and genocidal campaigns, remained unaddressed by the Pretoria agreement signed between Tigray and the Ethiopian government on November 2, 2022, primarily brokered by the USA. Furthermore, the agreement failed to confront Eritrea's regional destabilizing foreign policy and Amhara expansionism. Moreover, it compromised the core objectives of the Tigrayan struggle, notably self-determination through a referendum, safeguarding Tigray's territorial integrity, ensuring international accountability for perpetrators of atrocities in Tigray, and seeking compensation for the victims.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> In April 2021, Yemane Gebreab (political advisor of Issaias Afewerki) distributed a secret document entitled 'our mission in Tigray war did not meet its stated goals', to the Eritrean military leaders in Tigray clearly stated that the genocidal mission in Tigray was, by that time, not successful to achieve its planned goals and ordered his military leaders 'to accelerate their military operations in order capture the TPLF military and political leaders, to mercilessly eliminate the Tigraian youths who could be potential fighters of the Tigray Defense forces(TDF), to completely destroy the political economic bases and infrastructures of Tigray, and finalize the genocidal war so that to escape the international community's mounting pressure'.

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