Mapping Resource-related Inter-ethnic Conflicts in Metekel Zone of Benishangul Gumuz Region, Ethiopia

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Abstract

The Metekel zone in Ethiopia is marred by persistent interethnic conflicts, driven by a complex interplay of historical grievances, political issues, and socioeconomic challenges. This study examined the multifaceted dynamics of conflict in Metekel, focusing on the contextual backdrop, actors involved and their interests, and conflict dynamics. Data were collected using qualitative methods, including key informant interviews, expert interviews, and focus group discussions. In addition, secondary sources from the literature and those obtained from government offices in the study area were used. The study revealed that the conflict context in Metekel is characterized by recurring tensions among various ethnic groups, exacerbated by competition over natural resources, historical disputes, and political tensions. Actors in the conflict span local and regional entities, with their interests ranging from resource acquisition to power assertions and strategic positioning. Competing claims over land, cultural preservation, and political control seems to have drived conflict dynamics, aggravated by misinformation campaigns and historical grievances. Conflict dynamics in the area exhibit recurrence and escalation, marked by an increase in the frequency and intensity of violent confrontations. The study concludes that addressing the complex dynamics of the conflict in the zone requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges historical contexts, fosters inclusive governance, and promotes equitable resource use. Genuine dialogue and targeted peace-building efforts are essential for achieving sustainable reconciliation and peace in the area.

Keywords: Conflict context, resource conflict, conflict actors, Gumuz, Ethiopia

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1. Introduction

Over the past several years, Ethiopia has undergone a history of various types of internal conflicts. Till today, conflicts are widespread in the country and the causes of these conflicts are diverse and complex (Asnake, 2013; Yonas, 2014; Semir, 2019). Competition over scarce natural resources has become fierce in many parts of the country due to continued demographic pressure and resource degradation. In particular, access to and control over agricultural land and water resources are the main types of resource conflicts (Pankhurst, 2003; Fekadu, 2017). Although the country has been experiencing both ethnic and resource-based conflicts, the conflicts assumed a new structural dimension following the decentralization measure of the post-1991 years (Tegegn and Kassahun, 2004; Asnake, 2013; Semir, 2019). In most instances, resource-related conflicts take place along ethnic lines and involve various actors and stakeholders, which include local governments, community elites, religious groups, and identity groups.

Conflicts arising from disputes over natural resources have garnered increased academic and policy attention over the last four decades. Beginning in the 1980s, there has been widespread discourse on the significance of natural resources in conflict scenarios (Homer-Dixon, 1994; Collier and Hoeffler, 2005). The discussions primarily revolved around the debate of whether resource scarcity or abundance contributes to conflicts, often leading to violent confrontations. According to UNEP (2009 cited in Gluhbegovic, 2016), in the past 60 years, natural resources have been linked to at least 40% of intra-state conflicts in the world and these conflicts are twice as likely to recur within five years compared to conflicts unrelated to resources.

Continued debates over resource conflicts brought the importance of several contextual factors (social, economic, and political) influencing the prevalence and extent of resource-based conflicts. Previous conflict narratives that emphasized on population pressure, resource scarcity, and environmental degradation as causes of conflicts have been widely criticized for their inability to adequately and consistently explain natural resource conflicts (see Barnett, 2000). Although competition over resources happens to be at the

center of most conflicts, a complex set of factors is often involved related to the prevalence and intensity of conflicts.

Many experts and governments expect natural resources to become key drivers in a growing number of disputes, with potentially significant consequences for international, regional, and national peace and security (UNEP, 2015). As a result, there has been increased interest among academics and policymakers in understanding the drivers, dynamics, and patterns of conflicts to shape policy and practice that help to prevent, manage, and resolve conflicts. According to Gluhbegovic (2016), understanding of conflict should include state and non-state actors, violent and non-violent conflicts, regional dimensions, and a broad interpretation that considers socioeconomic, environmental, and other factors that may contribute to conflict.

Ethiopia has been ranked amongst less peaceful in 2020 than 2019 and ranked 133 from 163 countries. In Africa, Ethiopia is ranked 34 out of 44 surveyed countries only better than 10 countries (Berihu, 2021). In Ethiopia, there have been several studies (e.g. Gebre, 2004; Boku and Gufu, 2009; Mesfin, 2011; Gebre, 2012; Yonas, 2014; Fekadu, 2017; Dagnachew, 2018; McPeak and Little, 2018) that focus on explaining conflicts, conflict actors and sustainable peace. Among the most recent 8 conflicts occurred in Ethiopia, half of them were related to ethnic and tribal conflicts (Mirzaei, 2017). Tigist (2014) in her study on the long-stayed conflicts (since the end of the 20th century) among pastoralists in the Borana Area of Southern Ethiopia has emphasized that the conflict between Borana and Garri people are mainly caused by resource competition, autonomy and land ownership issue (Tigist, 2014). Over the past 20 years, several state-imposed changes were implemented that reconfigured borders, administrative units, and ethnic-based territorial claims, and these interventions and their associated repercussions are reflected at household, *kebele*, and district levels (McPeak and Little, 2018).

While several studies have attempted to address the drivers and consequences of resource conflicts in Ethiopia (particularly in Benishangu Gumuz Region), there is limited analysis that attempts to explore the role of complex factors

(political, economic, social, and cultural) in explaining resource-related conflicts in the region. The main objective of this study is to explore resource-related interethnic conflicts in the Metekel zone of BGR since 1991, particularly among the Gumuz, Amhara, and Agew ethnic groups.

1.2. Theoretical context

Experiences from several countries indicate that conflict is becoming more complex due to diverging interests among groups and the increased number and involvement of conflict actors. Scientific research does not support a deterministic cause-and-effect relationship between resources and conflict, and thus the focus moved on to exploring the effect of underlying and intervening variables (Schilling et al., 2018). Ethiopia is not an exception to this trend of conflicts which has become more complex and dynamic. In this regard, complexity theory provides an appropriate lens to investigate and understand the complexity and dynamic nature of conflicts in the country.

The use of complexity theory in conflict studies is growing, and insights from this theory about how best to influence the behavior of complex systems, how such systems respond to pressure, and how to avoid unintended consequences should thus be valuable for those involved in understanding and undertaking conflict resolution and peace building (de Coning, 2020).Specifically, the framework focuses on political, socio-economic, and cultural attributes related to conflict prevalence and dynamics, and options for conflict prevention, management, and transformation. Nevertheless, a complexity analysis is not about including all possible parties to a conflict, stakeholders as well as those who may indirectly influence the outcomes, but a comprehensive analysis of factors in complex systems that may account for processes observed and may influence outcomes (Hendrick, 2009).

Understanding resource-related interethnic conflict involves mapping the conflict situation from a historical perspective to explore the complexities and dynamics in conflict patterns, actors, and their interests. Authors like Sandole (1998) use six major components under three major pillars. However, this study used a framework that consists of four major components including the context of the conflict, actors, actor's interests, and the conflict dynamics.

2. Methodology

2.1. The study area

The study was carried out in Metekel zone which is one of the three administrative zones in the Benishangul Gumuz Region (BGR). The zone is situated in the western part of Ethiopia and shares borders with the North Gondar zone to the north, Khamashi zone to the south and southwest, Awi zone to the east, and Sudan to the west. With an estimated population of 1,251,000, females account for about 49.2% of the total population (CSA, 2023). The area is endowed with extensive potential agricultural land, vegetation with rich biodiversity, and perennial water resources. Metekel is also renowned for its diverse mineral deposits, particularly gold and marble. Metekelzone is inhabited by a diverse array of ethnic groups. Among the most prominent ethnic communities are the Gumuz, Agew, Berta, Shinasha, Mao, Amhara and Oromo.

Figure 1. Location of Metekel zone in Benishangul-Gumuz regional state

2.2. Data sources, methods of collection and analysis

The study employed a descriptive qualitative research approaches to achieve its objectives. The justification for employing a qualitative approach as the main methodology is to gain an in-depth understanding of the conflict context, actors in the conflict and their interests, and the conflict dynamics. Qualitative approaches have long been used to explore similar issues in conflict studies and they are considered as the best available approaches (Yonas, 2014).

A review of previous studies on conflict issues in Ethiopia in general and the study area in particular has been undertaken. The document review was mainly used as a basis for mapping the conflict context in the study area. In-depth interviews were conducted with key informants selected from among the local community representing the three ethnic groups, the Gumuz. Agew and Amhara. The key informants were carefully selected considering their knowledge about the topic of this study. A total of 47 key informants were selected and interviewed. The selection of the informants was done based on discussions with local elders, community leaders, and local authorities to ensure that the informants had the knowledge and information about resource-related conflicts in the area, and also considering reasonable representation from among the three ethnic groups. The Key Informant Interviews were also carried out with experts, selected from relevant government and non-governmental institutions who are directly or indirectly involved in conflict prevention, resolution, and management. Furthermore, six focus group discussions (FGDs) involving eight participants from diverse backgrounds were conducted to gather a collective viewpoint on the issues and triangulate the data gathered through other data collection methods. The selection process for FGD participants aimed to ensure adequate representation of various social and ethnic groups. Participants were chosen based on their expertise and firsthand experiences with conflicts and conflict scenarios within the study area. The data collected through the aforementioned methods is transcribed, organized, and analyzed thematically.

3. Results and Discussion

The study area is marked by persistent conflicts among its diverse ethnic communities, spanning many years and often leading to violence, displacement, and loss of life and livelihoods. These conflicts stem from a range of factors, including competition over resources, long-standing grievances, and political tensions. Inter-communal violence has been a common manifestation of the conflicts, with each ethnic group feeling marginalized and excluded from the decision-making processes. This section of the article discusses the results of the qualitative data analysis focusing on four key points: the contextual backdrop of the conflict, the actors involved in the conflict, the vested interests of the conflicting parties, and the intricate dynamics that underpin the conflict's evolution and perpetuation.

3.1. The conflict context

The conflict context in the Metekel zone can be understood by providing an overview of the history of the conflicts in the area, categorized into periods; before 1991, between 1991 and 2018, and after 2018. This categorization is primarily based on marked political transitions in the country.

Before 1991, there was a persistent conflict in the Metekel area, though on a relatively small scale. The conflict was sparked by the influx of people to Metekel's deserted forest area for hunting, often portrayed as an act of patriotism. For example, in 1952 skirmishes erupted between the Gumz people and neighboring communities including the Agew, Amhara, and Shinashas. These clashes resulted in numerous casualties and property damage. In January 1961, a forest fire originating from highland areas, mainly from Gumede and Genta Mariam where the so-called "red communities" reside, triggered renewed conflict. The conflict resulted in the expulsion of the red community from the Ganeta Maryam, Gumede, Bada Maksenet, and Mentewa districts. Nevertheless, tensions gradually eased leading to a decrease in hostilities.

Studying historical conflicts like the Gasassi war, which occurred in 1974, provides valuable insights into the complexities of inter-communal relations, resource disputes, and the challenges of governance in diverse societies.

According to key informants, the Gasassi war was between the "red communities" (which include the Amhara, Agew, Oromo, and Shinasha ethnic groups) and the Gumuz people. The conflict stemmed from various factors including disputes over property, boundary issues, taxation, deforestation, and other civil grievances. What began as localized tensions eventually escalated into a broader conflict. Lasting for nine months, the conflict inflicted significant casualties, particularly among the Shinasha population. The damage to human life was considerable and farmers have lost numerous homes and livestock.

The Gumuz community, which comprises various clans, was often embroiled in conflicts of varying scales. The disputes commonly arise from land and border disputes, disagreements over grazing spaces and rights, conflicts over access to water resources, incidents of abduction, and killings, and disputes related to unpaid loans. For example, the Deho clan residing in Gubesh Kebele has experienced numerous conflicts within its community. Similarly, the conflicts in Mandura and Dwab districts have led to the loss of lives. The intra-communal conflicts have also affected the Dechye and Dukeshowa clans. These conflicts and tension underscore the complexities that exist within the Gumuz community.

Since 1991, the area has been plagued by numerous causes of conflict involving countless participants. One of the primary drivers of these conflicts has been the contentious issue of resource utilization. Land, particularly agricultural land, and various minerals have been central to those conflicts, especially between 1992 and 2018. During this period, hundreds of hectares of forests, notably in the Dangur, Mandura, Gubo, Pawi Dibate, and Bullen woredas, were systematically logged under the guise of investment and exported to neighboring Sudan as well as to regions within Ethiopia such as Amhara. Tigray, Oromia, and Addis Ababa. Local communities of Gumuz and Shinasha didn't benefit from the revenues obtained nor did they were permitted to engage in labor work at the logging sites, which eventually the situation has become the cause of tension and conflict in the area. A community leader described the situation as follows:

> *Numerous individuals from the Tigray region, including former military, law enforcement, and political leaders, have been engaged in land expropriation under the guise of investment. Individuals of other nationalities were also involved in similar activities. This flagrant violation of the region's fundamental rights to self-rule has been perpetrated forcefully without consent. It is worth noting, however, that there were supporters of this malicious act among members of our community (KII 7, 2022).*

The assertion put forth by the community leader was reiterated by several other members of the community including local politicians and social activists. An officer from the Zonal Investment Office further substantiated this claim, indicating that the primary investors in the area and the region at large predominantly came from the Tigray Region. This underscores the widespread concern regarding the influence and impact of these investments on the socio-economic and political landscape of the area.

Another significant cause of conflict in Metekel zone pertains to border disputes which have intensified since 1991. This escalation stemmed from local political figures advocating for the expansion of their administrative territories, both at the woreda and zonal levels, leading to competing claims over specific territories. Consequently, a cycle of assertions and rebuttals regarding territorial claims and ownership ensued. Border disputes underscore broader challenges in delineating administrative boundaries and allocating resources, exacerbating tensions and contributing to ongoing conflict dynamics in the area. In this connection, an informant witnessed his experience as follows:

> *In a tragic event, a prominent individual from the Gumuz community was accidentally shot and killed. In retaliation, the Gumuz gunmen unleashed their fury, resulting in the death of 53 individuals and numerous injuries in a Salam Kebele. The violence spread to several other areas including Deq villages 134, 131, 49, 127, 46, and 5. Another distressing incident occurred in village 49 where regional officials returning from fieldwork were brutally killed with machetes and gunshots. This has led to the eruption of widespread clashes involving 40 members of government security forces and civilians from Pawi Woreda, other neighboring kebeles, and Alum town of Amhara region. (KII 13, 2022).*

As the key informant indicated, the conflict in the BGR, particularly in the Metekel zone, has led to significant displacement and disruption in the livelihood of the Gumuz and Shinasha people. The area has experienced recurring conflicts with transportation and public services being halted for over four years due to an emergency decree. Conflicts are prevalent in districts like Mandura, Dwab, Bullen, Dangur, Wonbera, Pawi, and Guba with incidents of eviction, murder, and property devastation. The conflicts are linked to questions surrounding the administration of Metekel, the representation of people in the local administration, and addressing border issues in the region. The conflicts have escalated due to claims and counterclaims by various political elites, exacerbating tensions and leading to further violence and displacement in the region.

Following the political reform in 2018 in the country, the socio-political landscape of both the nation and the regional administration has undergone numerous changes. This transformation has precipitated a series of inquiries about the governance structure of the Metekel zone and its associated border dynamics. Notably, specific administrative districts within the region, such as Mandura, Pawi, Dbate, DungurChasir Guba, and Bullen have emerged as focal points of conflict, marked by heightened inter-ethnic tensions. Predominantly, these conflicts have materialized between the indigenous Gumuz community and the non-indigenous population, mainly comprising of the Tigray, Amhara, Agew, and Oromo ethic groups. According toAdugna and Debela (2023), the politically dominant Gumuzin Metekeldisplaced the 'non-indigenous' ethnic groups with whom they had competed for resources, which many thousand Amhara and Agaw fled to Amhara Regional State as the conflict started.

Informants from the Amhara ethnic group have indicated that they are the primary victims of the recurrent conflict in the Metekel zone. They have also highlighted the inadequacy of government efforts to ensure their safety and security. Conversely, Amhara elites and activists advocate for the "return" of the Metekel zone, asserting its rightful place within the Amhara region. This stance has intensified the existing tensions between the Gumuz and the Amhara ethnic groups in the area. An informant explained this situation as follows:

> *The conflict has relapsed and continued to incur damage in the region because of claims and counterclaims by Amhara politicians to incorporate Metekelinto their administration. The Amhara elites believe that Metekel is their natural territory which was deliberately given to BGR by the TPLF to weaken the Amhara. The Gumuz were wrongly sensitized by TPLF to defend the Metekel zone from the Amharas (KII 5, 2022).*

Another local expert recounts the pivotal moment that aggravated the conflict, swiftly disseminating throughout the Metekel area within a short period. He emphasized the role of misinformation and disinformation campaigns spearheaded by local political elites, contributing significantly to the escalation of tensions as follows:

> *The local elite used to propagate that the federal government structure has been disbanded; Prosperity Party follows a unitary government structure; self-governance will no longer exist, district, zone, and regional leadership will be appointed directly from the central government. The new government adheres to one language, faith, and policy; the name of the region has been changed from Benshangul Gumuz to West Ethiopia, and the Metekel zone has been renamed West Ethiopia Metekel Awraja. They further advocate that Gumuz has lost its identity, existence, and history, and the land is completely given to the Amhara region. The local elite sympathized with Tigray people telling their community everyone was their enemy except the people of Tigray who helped them, all others must leave their land, we must not show mercy in any way, we must reclaim our land, we must be able to pay the sacrifices, any "red" on our land should be removed from our land (KII 9, 2022).*

This propaganda had been widely disseminated and called all ethnic Gumuz who are in national defense, the federal police, other security institutions, the special force of the region, the zone, and district police to join and defend their community. Elderlynon-Gumuz informant witnessed the situation as follows:

> *The local elites easily convinced their community (the Gumuz) by inciting grievances related to ownership of wealth and property in the region. They make provocative statements like give us a single native Gumuz who has produced wealth and property, look at all these hotels, farms, and shops. All do not belong to us. We do not have investors. Our land, forest, and minerals have been taken away from us; we have been robbed. They slandered us as beasts, and snake eaters, and they indirectly looted our wealth and property,*

they said that they were going to kick us out of our place and inheritance (KII 10,2022).

The call by the local elite crippled and dissolved the local government administration in most areas since most law enforcement agents and politicians joined the call. Extensive preparations have been made in public without fear or legal restrictions, especially in the villages where the conflict has been widely noticed, namely Degugur, Ben, Pawi, Guba, and in many kebeles and districts from the Madu zone. As a reaction to the Gumuzmove, the red community also informally organized themselves including para-military forces to defend themselves and their property.

3.2 Actors in the conflict

The literature on actors involved in inter-ethnic conflicts provides valuable insights into the dynamics at play. In the conflict within the Metekel zone, various actors were identified ranging from local, regional, and global levels. These actors can be categorized as primary, secondary, and tertiary parties in the conflict.

Locally, the conflict involves armed rebel groups (including paramilitary groups), clan leaders, and local political and administrative figures. However, the primary drivers of the ongoing conflicts are the ethno-elite representatives of various ethnic groups in the area. The Gumuz Liberation Front (GLF) stands out as a primary actor in the conflict, purporting to represent the interests of the Gumuz people.

Another key actor in the conflict is the Gumuz People's Democratic Movement (GPDM), which is heavily involved in attacks against other ethnic groups in the area. The movement promotes the idea that young people of fighting age should join its armed faction. Those within the Gumuz ethnic groups who refuse to join are subjected to attacks or pressured to leave the area.

The primary actors in this conflict are the Gumuz Liberation Front (GLF) and the regional government. They mobilize local populations and instigate conflict, coordinate attacks and protect the Gumuz community. They

frequently collaborate with the regional Special Forces, local law enforcement, and militias as well as with local political parties and politicians.

Secondary actors encompass a range of armed groups, including the Amhara Regional State special forces (Liyu Hayel), BGR special forces, and rebel forces in the Amhara and Oromia regions all representing their respective ethnic constituents. Within this category, businessmen and investors are also implicated due to their interest in the region. Informants have reported that armed groups, mainly rebel factions, from the Amhara, Oromia, and Tigray communities participated in the conflict. Their primary aim was to protect their ethnic communities from the threats posed by the Gumuz armed groups. These groups had the feeling that the BGR government had failed to mitigate the conflict. Some of these armed groups originated from neighboring regions, crossing regional boundaries and they received financial and logistical support from businessmen and investors belonging to their respective ethnic groups.

External forces, mainly Sudan and Egypt, play a role as tertiary parties in the conflict. These countries are accused by the local government of supplying weapons and logistical support to the rebels and exacerbating inter-ethnic conflict in the area. According to local informants, Sudan fuels the existing conflicts by providing support, including weapons, training, and sanctuary to rebel groups operating in the BGR to exert influence over border issues with Ethiopia. As the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is situated in the BGR, Egypt's involvement is in anticipation of the impacts of the inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts in disturbing Ethiopia's development projects. A local conflict expert explained the situation as follows:

> *Both Egypt and Sudan possess strategic interests in the conflicts within the BGR, aiming to destabilize the region to impede the construction of the GERD. Agents affiliated with these governments closely collaborate with the Gumuz rebel groups, actively engaging in disinformation campaigns to fuel ethnic tensions in the area. They have also reportedly influenced regional politicians and local elites through bribes. The situation in the region is incredibly intricate and exceeds conventional understanding (KII 3, 2022).*

The perspective provided by the aforementioned informant highlights the intricate nature of the conflict in the Metekel zone, revealing the participation

of both regional and international actors. This underscores the difficulties in achieving conflict resolution and transformation, as these external actors further complicate the situation by influencing local actors to advance their strategic interests.

3.3 Interest of the actors

The interests of the various actors involved in the inter-ethnic conflicts in BGR, particularly in the Metekel zone, include a spectrum of motivations ranging from resource acquisition to the assertion of power and strategic positioning. A nuanced understanding of these interests at play is crucial for devising effective strategies aimed at conflict mitigation, facilitating resolutions, and fostering sustainable peace-building efforts within the area.

Resource interests represent a significant face of the conflicts, with competition over land, water, forests, and economic opportunities serving as primary drivers. In the study area where fertile land and natural resources are abundant, tensions often arise due to competing claims over these valuable resources. As noted by Abbink (2005), the struggle for control over land and other natural resources has historically fueled inter-ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia, with groups competing for access to arable land and grazing areas. A local leader explains the diverging interests behind the conflict in Metekel as follows:

> *Given the proximity to the Sudan and the construction site of the GERD, the area holds significant prospects for development. This attracts attention from various actors in the area in terms of tapping these potentials and benefiting from the economic opportunities. The competing interests among ethnic groups reflect a deeper tension and conflict over control and utilization of resources (KII 15, 2022).*

As highlighted by the local leader, the competition for influence and access to the region's potential is multifaceted, involving a diverse array of actors and interests. These include not only investors seeking economic opportunities but also senior citizens looking for retirement prospects, government employees seeking advancement, former army officers leveraging their experience, security forces aiming at asset control, and members of political parties seeking to expand their influence. This diverse

mix of stakeholders reflects the complex dynamics at play in the region's development landscape. However, this multiplicity of actors underscores the need for effective governance structures and mechanisms to manage conflicts of interest, ensure transparency, and promote sustainable peace and development outcomes.

Value-based interest also plays a crucial role, encompassing cultural, religious, and ideological considerations. Deep-seated ethnic identities and historical grievances contribute to the perpetuation of conflicts, as communities seek to preserve their distinct values and traditions. In this regard, Mamdani (2001) emphasizes the significance of identity politics in driving conflicts within multiethnic societies like Ethiopia.

The Gumuz elites are deeply concerned about the perceived threat to their culture and values posed by other ethnic groups, mainly the Amhara, Agew, and Oromo ethnic groups. They fear that their identity and rights to self-administration are at risk. They openly discuss the dangers of cultural fusion and acculturation brought about by the presence of these ethnic communities. In this regard, an informant explains the threats as follows:

> *The rapid expansion of cities and the influx of people from various regions seeking opportunities have led to numerous challenges in our communities. the growth of investments and urban areas often results in the displacement of residents from their ancestral lands. This exposes us to unfamiliar lifestyles and norms, some of which conflict with our cherished values and cultural traditions. While I acknowledge the importance of urban development and local economic growth, I contend that it should not I am not opposing the growth of cities and local economy. But I am arguing it should not come at the detriment of the well-being and rights of local populations (KII 11, 2022).*

Power dynamics further complicate the landscape of inter-ethnic conflicts, as various actors view dominance and influence with the region, particularly the study area. Political elites, armed groups, and government entities often leverage their power to advance their agenda, exacerbating tension and hindering peaceful coexistence. As Lyons (2019) argues, the struggle for political control and representation lies at the heart of many conflicts in Ethiopia, including those witnessed in the Metekel zone.

For instance, the Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups express discontent arguing that they lack adequate representation in the region's political landscape despite their numerical superiority. The asset that the current political framework unfairly consolidates power within the Gumuz elites. Conversely, the Gumuz contend that political authority should exclusively belong to them as they are the area's indigenous inhabitants.

According to Hagmann and Abbink (2012), external actors often play a significant role in perpetuating conflicts in Ethiopia, contributing to the complexity of the situation. Strategic interests shape the behavior of actors involved in inter-ethnic conflicts, as they seek to secure an advantage or protect their positions within the broader geopolitical context. Strategic considerations may involve alliances with external actors, such as neighboring states or international organizations, to bolster one's position or garner support for specific objectives.

3.4 The conflict dynamics

Conflict dynamics in Metekel exhibit a complex interplay of various factors that have contributed to its evolution over time. Understanding these dynamics requires a nuanced analysis of the patterns, processes, and underlying factors influencing the development of tensions and conflicts. Firstly, the conflict pattern in Metekel is characterized by recurrence, with incidents stemming from local triggers and escalating into larger confrontations. Since 2010, there has been a discernable increase in the frequency and intensity of conflict incidents, including a broad spectrum of issues and involving an increasing number of actors. According to local informants, there has been a marked escalation in the conflict situation starting from 2018, reaching a peak in political violence during the years 2020 and 2021.

The escalation of conflict in BGR, and particularly in the Metekel zone, is attributed to several key factors. The proliferation of rebel and paramilitary groups and the formation of blocs along ethnic lines is one significant contributor. These groups often pursue divergent agendas, exacerbating tensions that lead to violent confrontations. Furthermore, the influx of

firearms from neighboring countries, particularly Sudan, has intensified the conflict, enabling armed factions to engage in deadly skirmishes with devastating consequences.

Between 2018 and 2020, deadly clashes have ravaged the region, inflicting devastating loss of lives on communities. According to local leaders, over one thousand causalities have been reported while approximately 300,000 individuals have been forcibly displaced from their homes. The pervasive impact of violence underscores the urgent need for effective conflict mitigation and management mechanisms.

4. Conclusion

The conflict in the Metekel zone epitomizes the enduring ethnic tensions and intricate socio-political challenges in Ethiopia. Historical grievances intertwined with contemporary political issues have fueled cycles of violence and displacement among the various ethnic groups living in the area. Since 1991, conflicts have intensified and exacerbated resource competition and political maneuvering, which misinformation campaigns have further stoked the tensions. The aftermath of political reforms in 2018 has reshaped the conflict situation, with intensified territorial disputes and ethnic representation adding to the complexity. The conflict in the Metekel zone involved several actors ranging from local to region/global levels and reflected a multifaceted interplay of various factors. The findings of this study emphasize the significant role played by the Gumuz rebel groups as the central actors in the conflict. Moreover, the participation of paramilitary forces representing the Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups accentuates the complexity and continuity of the conflict. The involvement of third-party actors such as Egypt and Sudan, motivated by their strategic interests, further complicates the conflict landscape. The varied interests of the participating parties, spanning from resource control to ideological convictions and political influence, underscore the multifaceted nature of the Metekel conflict.

Attempts to address the complex dynamics of the conflict by the regional and federal governments have not yielded results. Addressing these conflicts necessitates a comprehensive approach that acknowledges historical

injustices, fosters inclusive governance, and addresses socio-economic disparities. In addition, mitigating tensions requires genuine dialogue, equitable resource distribution, combating misinformation above all collaboration among government entities, community leaders, and civil society to promote reconciliation and sustainable peace-building.

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