Armed Non-State Actors in Ethiopia: Drivers and Regional Security

Gizachew Asrat

Senior Researcher, Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA), Ethiopia

Henok Getachew

Senior Researcher, Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA), Ethiopia

Abstract

This article examined the causes, activities, and conditions (domestic and regional) for the emergence and intransigence of ANSAs and the security implications they have posed to the Horn in general and Ethiopia in particular by answering the following research questions: What factors explain the continuous rise of insurgency in the Horn of Africa particularly in Ethiopia? And how do the domestic and regional contexts challenge the unfolding efforts to deal with sanctuary insurgency? To address this research question the study employed primary and secondary data collection tools, such as, KIIs. Armed groups are widely seen as a danger to Ethiopia's national stability. Since April 2018, when a new administration took office, Ethiopia has taken drastic measures to address the problem of armed groups by removing them from its terrorist list. As a result, most armed groups have denounced violence and announced their readiness to participate in peaceful electoral politics. Despite all this over the last five years, Ethiopia as a state has faced challenges caused by ANSAs. This article identified three domestic factors that contributed for the unrelenting existence and proliferation of ANSAs in Ethiopia. These are politics of autochthony, weaponizing identity, and unemployment. In addition to these domestic factors, regional issues such as historical enmity, mistrust, proxy, inability to control areas effectively, state failure, local level corruption, the abundance of weaponry, and the rugged topography of the international border areas of Ethiopia are the main contributing factors for the continuous proliferation of ANSAs in Ethiopia. Addressing these issues requires a multi-pronged approach that tackles ethnic grievances, promotes genuine dialogue between communities, and dismantles the networks that perpetuate violence. Regionally, following diplomatic communication and security cooperation are viable options for regional security.

Introduction

Different variants of organizations, entities, or individuals are currently engaged in international relations. Apart from state actors, non-state actors (NSA) that include Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), terrorist organizations, civil societies, private sectors, international and multi-national organizations, and criminal gangs have participated at the global stage, albeit with varying degrees of influence (Saifullah & Ahmed, 2020). The NSA can generally be classified as unarmed non-state and armed non-state actors (ANSA) (Williams, 2018). Although these ANSAs are categorized

separately again, they can change their existence, creating new ties, exploiting new opportunities, and changing their objectives, membership, and operations (Varin, 2017). As the international system experiences a multifaceted rearrangement of power distribution and modes of governance, manifold challenges emanate not merely from state actors like China, Russia, the USA, and other emerging powers . As the competition between these intensifies, both sides are vying for control. Non-state armed actors such as terrorists, militants, militias, and criminal groups are acquiring increasing power, thereby challenging the state's authority, which has suffered from a paucity of legitimacy and capacity. The increasing phenomena of state failure, economic breakdown, social crisis, and reversal of political transition have offered opportunities to criminal and militant groups, as well as other non-state armed actors, to become relatively more robust (Brown, 2021) through recruiting and enlisting support among the marginalized sections of societies and competing for filling a security vacuum left by the state.

The participation and involvement of the NSA at the global arena challenge the very principles of the Westphalia tradition of 1648, which has given prime attention to the importance of state authority and the monopoly of violence, especially during times of conflict. Various factors instigate different armed groups to take the path of violent strategy to achieve their objectives. Ideological or political aims are one of the factors that inspired armed non-state actors to seek for holding territory and overthrow a government. Although their objectives vary, armed non-state actors are engaged in violent armed conflict against the state and each other. Such actors, deliberately or otherwise, regularly cause the displacement of people. They have no regard for the damage, distress and deaths they cause and may use displacement as a deliberate tactic to pursue their goals of power, resources or 'justice' (Forced Migration Review, 2021). By the rules of the modern world, states bear the responsibility to protect all in their territory (Ibid), albeit with limited success.

The increasing influences of ANSAs have caused national security concerns in the sense that their "senseless" and "pointless" violence, to use the words of Mamdani (2003), has remained the hallmark of Post-Colonial Africa and yielded negative consequences: mass displacement, property destruction, looting, kidnapping threats, and livelihood and life insecurity. Some of the worst violations in the world and in the Horn of Africa against humanity are associated with the actions of armed non-state organizations (Varin, 2017). These groups perpetrate violence against non-combatants targeted groups and the state to achieve their socioeconomic, political, and religious objectives. They are using violence against innocent citizens as retaliation or for fighting the state, resulting in forced displacement of local communities. Accordingly, people are displaced due to enforced disappearances, death threats, gender-based violence, attacks on civilian infrastructure and property, torture, forced labor, and forced recruitment and execution.

Over the past couple of decades, literature has recognized the increasing role and influence of armed non-state actors in different quarters of the geopolitical hotspots, including Africa.

For instance, scholars pay due attention to the growing presence of terrorists in Nigeria (Abubakar, 2017), Mali (Cocodia, 2017), and Libya (Jaeger, 2017). Other scholars focus on rebel movements in DRC (Cullen, 2017), Central African Republics (Isaacs-Martin, 2017), Ethiopia (Berouk, 2017), and Rwanda (Melvin, 2017). Furthermore, the works of van Wyk (2017) and Tar and Wapmuk (2017) scrutinize the activities of warlords in Uganda and Sierra Leone, respectively. Besides geographical coverage, countries in the Horn of Africa continue to face security challenges from Al-Shabab, the Sudan Liberation Army, the Justice and Equality Movement, and the Islamic Salvation Movement.

Horn states have gone through at least one civil war during their post-colonial time (Minigsteab, 2011). In most cases, they have fought multiple civil wars, with militia groups created by the state on one hand and sub-state actors, such as ethnic, regional, religious, or other political organizations, on the other. The region's civil wars differ in scope and intensity, and many of them are closely linked to inter-state conflicts since, in many cases, the groups that battle against the state either serve as proxies for other states or are backed by them (Ibid).

Governments in the Horn have intervened in each other's internal conflicts for various reasons. Some support insurgencies in a neighboring country because of ethnic ties with the rebelling groups. Others supported rebel groups in neighboring countries as extensions of their foreign policies, including the destabilization of regimes with which they had antagonistic relations. Few years back, for instance, successive Ethiopian authorities countered Somalia's support for irredentist movements by aiding insurgency movements such as the Somali National Movement (SNM) and Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) against the Somali state, and TFG against the al Shebab-Hizbul Islamiya insurrection. Sudan supported Eritrea's Liberation Movements, the People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) against Ethiopia. For its part, Ethiopia supported the SPLM against successive Sudanese regimes (Minigsteab, 2011; Venkataraman, 2005). Sudan supported the Eritrean Islamic Jihad in 1993–94, and Eritrea reacted by supporting Sudan's opposition groups, such as the National Democratic Alliance (Kibreab, 2009) as cited in (Minigsteab 2011). Eritrea supported various Ethiopian insurgency groups against the Ethiopian regime at different times.

In contrast, the Ethiopian regime retaliated by supporting Eritrean opposition groups, including the Eritrean Democratic Alliance and other smaller groups, such as the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organisation (RSADO) (Minigsteab, 2011). Recently, this trend of hosting or supporting ANSA by neighboring countries has prevailed in the Horn and greater Horn Africa. Sudan allegedly supports TPLF against Ethiopia, Eritrea against Djibouti, and Rwanda is accused of supporting M23 against DRC. This tradition of proxy intervention has often challenged diplomatic and foreign relations in the region, affecting the dream of regional integration and cooperation.

Although the government tried to bring political reforms over the last four years, Ethiopia as a state has faced such challenges caused by ANSAs[1]. It is a self-evident truth that civilians in different corners of Ethiopia have suffered from violent attacks unleashed by [unidentified] armed non-state actors over the past four years. Most new displacements triggered by conflict and violence in 2020 were recorded in Sub-Saharan Africa. Of these, Ethiopia, together with Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo, accounts for 7 million internally displaced persons (IDMC, 2020).

Cognizant of the security challenges stemming from the activities of armed non-state actors, Berouk tried to examine the forty years' of the major armed groups in Ethiopia seeking to secure "legitimacy, political power, autonomy, and secession" (2017, p. 163). He looked at the historical contexts, the political structure, and the counter-insurgency modus operandi managed by the state before 2017. While recognizing the scholarly contributions of the work to the literature on armed non-state actors, there are still areas that need to be covered by researchers, particularly in the domain of policy research. Inadequacies and gaps exist in determining the state's ability to handle traditional and non-traditional national security issues and challenges.

In this study, An ANSA refers to an organized group with a basic command structure that operates independently from state control and employs force to achieve its political or purportedly political objectives.(DCAF, 2015). Accordingly, this article examined the causes, activities and conditions (domestic and regional) for the emergence and intransigence of ANSAs and their security implications to the Horn, in general and Ethiopia, in particular by answering the following research questions:

- What factors explain the continuous rise of insurgency in the Horn of Africa, particularly in Ethiopia?

- How do the domestic and regional contexts challenge the unfolding efforts of the states, dealing with sanctuary insurgency?

Methods

Explanatory research design was applied to explain the conditions and effects of Armed Non-State Actors and the actions or strategies governments could take to contain these actors and enhance their national security. The study dominantly followed a qualitative approach to analyze the obtained data. To that end, the research employed a systematic collection of primary and secondary data. Fieldwork was conducted between late December and January 2022/23[2]. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to select 22 key informants. Open-ended questions were used to conduct in-depth interviews and gather expert and practical opinions about the issue. Intellectuals from public universities, experts, security agencies

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[1] Among others, OLF-Shenie (Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), Gambella People's Liberation Army (GPLA), Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM), Qimant fighters, and TPLF.

[2] For this article, data were collected from October 2022 to June 2023. As a result, any developments after June 2023 are not included.

(police commissions, intelligence office, regional security office), and regional administrative bureau were interviewed. Respondents also included senior government officials, heads of police commissions, security and peace bureau authorities, former insurgent members, and former and current advisors of regional state president office peace and security advisors. The study participants were selected from Benishangul-Gumuze, Gambella, Amhara Regional States, and Federal Government Offices. To enrich the primary data analysis, the researchers consulted reports, magazines, journals, research works, books, and internet sources.

Theoretical Discussion

Definition and Characters

Insurgency is not a new phenomenon in the history of conflict. Since antiquity, insurgencies have remained the hallmark of state-society interaction when the central governing entity fails to mediate interests amicably. Currently, insurgencies are common features of states with socio-political fragmentation and have diminished legitimate monopoly of violence, frequented in "many states in Latin America, Asia, and Africa" (Acemoglu et al., 2013, p. 5). Since the war in Iraq in 2003, the insurgency has significantly seized the attention of scholars to the extent of "becom[ing] [one of the] dominant themes on the security agenda, replacing peacekeeping, humanitarian operations and terrorism as key concepts" (Rich & Duyvesteyn, 2012, p. 2). Defining insurgency by taking the causes, instruments, and objectives into consideration is not uncommon. For instance, insurgency is defined by the Central Intelligence Agency

(2011, p. 2) as "a protracted political-military activity directed toward completely or partially controlling the resources of a country through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations". The modus operandi of insurgency *inter alias* includes guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and political mobilization to degrade the capacity of a state and diminish its legitimacy while enhancing the insurgent capacity to vie for controlling territory and augment its legitimacy (Acemoglu et al., 2015, p. 3).

Traditionally, insurgencies have certain things in common: "total war on a limited scale; insurgents are much weaker than the government they fight; insurgency has traditionally had a domestic origin and has been directed at a political or an economic objective" (Somit, 1962: 46). The political goal is aimed at either creating a separate state or remodeling the state on the basis of the ideological belief the insurgents espouse. Furthermore, insurgents also have an international dimension of political objective that is demonstrated by generating international support and drying up the international community's diplomatic and military assistance offered to the government (Byman et al, 2001). Economically, insurgents may be dissatisfied with the existing economic condition and work towards reforming or overturning the dominant system, as manifested during the FARC and Maoist insurgencies in Columbia and Nepal, respectively (Ibid). With time, it has acquired new features: inter alias, acquiring external support in terms of sanctuary, technical, military, logistic assistance, and ideology, as well as increasingly accruing the broader attention of the international community as

per the strength of the insurgent fighting the incumbent government (Salehyan & Cunningham, 2011: 709-744).

Typologies and Condition

Although insurgents demonstrate the preceding common traits with varying degrees of intensity, they can be classified according to their objectives: pressure hostile states through proxy, dismantle foreign occupation or colonial establishment, and overturn the existing socioeconomic and political arrangement. Accordingly, scholars have begun to develop a framework of insurgency analysis to understand the contexts in which violence thrives intensely. For instance, during the turn of the 21st century, African insurgents were classified as secessionist, liberationist, reformist, and warlord movements drawing on their ideologies, structures, and discipline (Clapham, 1998, pp. 6-8). Researchers also attempt to classify insurgencies according to the goals they aspire to attain and their organizational structures. With regard to the former, they are categorized as revolutionary, reformist, secessionist, resistance, and commercialist. Another categorization is whether the insurgency is structured politically, militarily, traditionally, or urban-centered (CIA, 2012, p.1). The increasing emergence of Islamist militant groups has further demanded the addition of another typology of insurgency to the security landscape of Africa. Based on the evolving nature of insurgency in Africa, literature is increasingly paying attention to terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda(Boeke, 2016)[3], the Islamic State (2016)[4], Al-Shabab(Hansen, Stig Jarle, 2017)[5], Boko Haram(Inioluwa Adeoluwa Nehmah Dele-Adedeji, 2017)[6], Ansar Al-Sunna or Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jammát (Morier-Genoud, Eric, 2020[7]; Mutasa and Muchemwa, 2021[8]; Njelezi, Mauro Tiago, 2022)[9]that "are intimately linked to competing systems of governance" (Gosh, 1978:290-312).

Apart from the discussion on the typologies of insurgencies, attention has been drawn to the underlying factors that breed and exacerbate a violent form of struggle in a polity. There is no one-size-fits-all analysis to uncover the root causes of insurgency because each insurgency may have a peculiar feature. The factors that necessitated the outbreak of insurgencies in different countries differ according to the contexts. Furthermore, similar circumstances have not shaped the development of all insurgencies. Nevertheless, there is a common

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[3] Boeke, S. (2016). Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, insurgency, or organized crime? *Small Wars and Insurgencies,* 27(5):914–936.

[4] Lister, C. (2016). The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[5] Somalia: Al-Shabaab and the Accidental Jihadists. 181-196 Africa's Insurgents: Navigating an Evolving Landscape edited by Morten Bøås and Kevin C. Dunn. Boulder: Lynne Rienner

[6] Nigeria: The Adaptability of the Boko Haram Rebellion. 157-180. Africa's Insurgents: Navigating an Evolving Landscape edited by Morten Bøås and Kevin C. Dunn. Boulder: Lynne Rienner

[7] The jihadi insurgency in Mozambique: origins, nature and beginning. Journal of East African Studies 14(3):396-412.

[8] Mutasa, M. N. and Muchemwa, C.Ansar . (2021).Al-Sunna Mozambique: Is It the Boko Haram of Southern Africa? *Journal of Applied Security Research,* 17(3): 332-351.

[9] Insurgency and subversion: An analysis of the modes of operation for understanding the attacks in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, African Security Review 31(4):353-366.

understanding that insurgency appears to happen when the situation permeates. Accordingly, understanding the causes of insurgency needs to uncover the socioeconomic, political and geopolitical contexts (Gosh, 1978), without which it is impossible to discern the very origins of violence unleashed against the state by non-state actors. Literature pays attention to the origin and the dynamics of insurgency by identifying a wide range of factors, such as political, economic, and ideological, as a result. Grievances related to mis(under) representation, human rights violations, discrimination, marginalization, the quest for self-determination, poverty, weakness of the government, ideology, militarization of the society, proliferation of light and small weapons, and lack of job opportunities are among the most cited causes for the insurgency. These factors could also be mentioned as a source of insurgencies in Africa in general and in the Horn of Africa in particular.

In addition, apart from the domestic conditions of insurgencies, the regional and international conditions remain to be important variables in shaping the advent and thriving of insurgency against the state. Regional geopolitics replete with interstate disputes, states' crises, and proliferation of small and light weapons have adversely affected the adjacent state by nurturing a friendly environment for the advent of insurgencies as vividly demonstrated in the Horn of Africa, such as the Somali National Movement (SNM), Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (Clapham, 1993). In the wake of the end of the Cold War era, as Becket (2012:24) asserted, new ideological, political and commercial imperatives [are] encouraging intra-state conflict and insurgency. Indeed, the increasing dominance of insurgency should also be viewed within the context of the increasingly salient feature of identity politics and non-state actors that have remained the dominant features of the last three decades. At present, the external context also matters to the viability of insurgency battling the government in the region. One of the instances that help the activities of insurgency includes the continuation of manifold external assistance, such as military, diplomatic, political, logistic, psychological, propaganda, sanctuary, intelligence, and training. In such circumstances, state and non-state actors can support insurgent movements that can determine the effectiveness of insurgencies (Byman et al., 2001).

Results and discussion

The Factors behind Ethiopia's Growing Number of Armed Groups

Ethiopia has a protracted history of insurgency dating back to the 1960s. While some of these groups have undergone demobilization and dissolution processes, others have persisted as clandestine appendages of registered political parties. Historically, these non-state actors have been perceived as significant impediments to the achievement and maintenance of national stability. However, a paradigm shift transpired, in April 2018, with the inauguration of a new administration. In a bold initiative to address the contentious issue of armed opposition groups, the government delisted them from proscribed terrorist

organizations. This policy change, coupled with the rapprochement with Eritrea, facilitated the repatriation of these groups and exiled opposition leaders. Consequently, entities including the ONLF, the OLF, the Afar People Liberation Front (APLF), and Ginbot 7 got back to their country (Taddelle, 2021). Most armed groups have denounced violence and announced their readiness to participate in peaceful electoral politics. Some of them, for instance the OLF, participated in 2022 elections even as elements of their armed wings[10] are fighting the forces of the state. Similarly, other armed groups such as the Patriotic Ginbot 7 (PG7) party in Ethiopia does not exit less than a year after its activities were regularized by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's administration.[11] In Ethiopia, the enduring presence and expansion of Armed Non-State Actors (ANSAs) necessitate a thorough examination of several interconnected factors. This section looks land and identity, weaponization of ethnicity, and unemployment as domestic factors.

The Politics of Autochthony and Weaponization of Identity

Ethiopia's ethnic-based federalism was designed to address historical marginalization and has brought about unintended consequences. Mulugeta & Woldemariam (2022) argued that the current ethnic federal arrangement in the country disadvantages marginalized groups and fails to foster cultural preservation. They further argue that it has the potential to exacerbate ethnic competition and instability (Ibid). Similarly, an informant stated that ethnic politicization has indeed led to the displacement and disenfranchisement of various groups.[12] The entanglement of ethnicity and land governance in Ethiopia makes these issues inseparable. Grievances related to land dispossession, alienation, and exclusion from economic opportunities fuel discontent, particularly among the Gumuz people (Tsegaye, 2017; Dagnachew, 2020).

This is evident in the case of the Kemant people in the Amhara Region, who advocate for greater autonomy. To articulate their agenda of self-administration and autonomy, they formed Kemant Nationality Quest for Identity and Self-rule. The Gumuz fighters in the Benishangul-Gumuz Region, similarly, raised their concern about their inadequate representation within the regional government.[13] The Gumuz fighters highlight their marginalization by comparing themselves to the wealthier, what they referred as "Highlanders", and their exclusion from regional economic structures.[14] They frame the narrative of their struggle as one of communal self-defense and autochthony, claiming a historical right to the Metekel zone (Rift Valley Institute, 2021). This narrative resonates with the Amhara elites and Fano militia who also claim ancestral ties to the

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[10] What they call Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and government uses as OLF-Shenie. For this paper we use interchangeable.

[11] https://www.africanews.com/2019/05/10/ethiopia-s-ginbot-7-dissolves-transforms-into-new-united-party/

[12] Gambella Regional State Civil Service Bureau Expert. Personal Interview. Gambella. 2023.

[13] Security Personality. Personal Interview. 2022

[14] Gambella Regional State Peace and Security Officer, Personal Interview, 2022

region, creating a tense and combustible situation.

The Gambella Regional State exemplifies similar dynamics. The Gambella People's Liberation Front (GPLF) seeks to address the political and social marginalization of the Anuak people, historically the region's majority (Zewdie, 2021). They demand greater representation, a voice in decision-making processes, and equitable access to land and economic opportunities. Land issues further complicate the security landscape of the regional states of the country, dominantly in Gambella, Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuze, and Amhara regions. The unintended consequences of Ethiopia's ethnic federal arrangement raise questions about its long-term viability. While ethnic recognition offers a sense of belongingness and cultural preservation, it can also lead to competition for resources and political power along ethnic lines. This can be particularly problematic in regions with diverse ethnic populations, where claims of autochthony can be used to justify exclusion and violence.

The proliferation of non-state armed groups in Ethiopia is often driven by the exploitation of local conflicts and grievances by elites. This dynamic highlights how armed groups do not always emerge organically from grassroots movements but can be a consequence of grievances manipulated by self-serving political actors. One prominent example is the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which initially arose as a dominant political force but felt increasingly marginalized under the central government. These political and economic grievances fuelled the formation of

an armed group that actively fought against the incumbent regime. Interestingly, the TPLF is accused of further manipulating local conflicts, pressuring the Qemant fighters to escalate their demands for autonomy within the Amhara region.[15] The TPLF is also alleged to have backed the Gumuz fighters to maintain its economic dominance in the region's gold mining, service sector, and agricultural areas.[16] This pattern of elite manipulation indicated that armed groups do not always emerge organically from local conflicts. As noted by Hirblinger et al., they are a direct consequence of grievances exploited by self-serving elites who seek to maintain their political influence and secure access to resources (2019).

Another factor in the proliferation of non-state armed groups is the violent competition between regional, national, and provincial elites. These political actors may have connections or affiliations with certain insurgent groups due to shared ideologies, grievances, strategic considerations, and calculated political maneuvers. These connections can manifest in various forms, such as providing financial support, offering safe havens, or even actively participating in insurgent activities. This blurs the lines between political figures and armed groups, as exemplified by the case of the Kemant fighters in the Amhara region, who allegedly received training and sanctuary from the TPLF elite. Similarly, dissatisfied army officers and regional ruling party members have also been involved in armed mobilization, further complicating the security landscape. Informants from different regions, such as

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[15] Anonymous interview. 2022.

[16] Ibid

Gambela, Amhara, and Benishangul-Gumuz, have reported instances of tacit support for insurgencies by government officials at various levels. In this regard, an informant from Gambela noted that 'internal division within the regional ruling party and the nexus of interests between some members of the ruling party and insurgents serve as a cause for local insecurity. During the 15 June 22 attack, some of the region's politician and security personnel guided OLF-Shane to Gambella City to inflict damage'. With the support of an armed group, a politician gains influence within their "community." An informant from Gambella stated that:

> Corruption networks involving the illicit trade of weapons and the transportation of confiscated weapons extend to the country's central region. Government vehicles are reportedly used for this purpose. These illicit activities generate substantial profits, with the militants benefiting greatly.[17]

The existence of deeply entrenched corruption networks involving the illicit arms trade, with weapons being transported using government vehicles, further complicates the security landscape and directly benefits the militant groups (Ibid). Regional and local elites in Ethiopia are divided along ethnic lines. Despite their underlying motivations for political power and wealth, these elites strategically employ ethnic identity to mobilize and rally their supporters. Each group is perceived as marginalized based on their

ethnic identity. This perception leads to a situation where every group prioritizes the interests of their own ethnic community, even if it comes at the expense of the broader national interest. For instance, a group that claims to represent Kemant people resorts to violence to secure their demand for self-administration. Similarly, the groups who claimed to be representatives of Gumuz raised the issue that the Amhara elite and those who claimed to be representatives of it regard the Metekel as an Amhara historical right of its territory. Such senses of anxiety and fear feed the violence in the Amhara and Benishangule Gumz regions. Ethiopia's controversial ethnic federal system, initially intended to address historical marginalization, has had unintended consequences (Habtu, 2003; Kefale, 2013). The system has fostered extreme ethnic politicization, leading to the displacement and disenfranchisement of various groups. This fuels feelings of resentment and a desire for self-determination, creating fertile ground for the emergence of armed groups like the OLF-Shenie (Oromo Liberation Army) (OLA). Since ethnicity seems highly politicized, groups that claim to represent different identities find themselves in struggle against alleged system inequalities in line with their ethnic identity, which in turn aggravates unhealthy competition between regional and local groups.

Unemployment

The youth in Ethiopia[18] constitute the majority in relative and absolute terms compared with

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[17] Gambella Regional State Peace and Security Officer, Personal Interview, 2022

[18] The percentage of people who were working-age (15–64) was estimated to be 62.6 percent of the total

population. The population of the youth, according to the Ethiopian definition (15–29 years), was a proportion of 32 percent. See the Ethiopian statistics

other demographic groups in the country. The lack of employment opportunities for the youth contributed to the rise of violence in the country, and ANSA used this situation as an opportunity to recruit new members. A respondent from Gambella stated that youths and adults are the primary recruitment targets. GPLF recruits youths primarily in Belo, Itang, Abole, Lare, and Gambela woredas. Youth recruitment efforts often leverage the promise of significant financial compensation during military service and deployments.[19] Many unemployed graduates have joined insurgent groups such as Kemant, GLF, and OLF-Shenie. These groups entice them with false promises for a better life. Although the payments they receive may be meager, it is a common phenomenon in Africa. As the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has reported, religious beliefs and unemployment play a more significant role in driving people to join rapidly expanding armed groups in sub-Saharan Africa. It argued that lack of income, job opportunities, and livelihoods means that "desperation is pushing people to take up opportunities, whoever offers them" (Ibid.). The majority of individuals who joined the insurgents in Ethiopia were unemployed youths, predominantly males. For instance, during the reintegration process between August 2022 and November 2022, out of a total of 940 Kemant fighters, only 13 were females, while 927 were males. These fighters were in the age range of 18 to 40.[20] According to an informant,

it was observed that a significant number of recruits had educational backgrounds limited to primary and secondary levels.[21]Consequently, unemployed youths with low education backgrounds became the primary target group for Kemant insurgents during recruitment. Similarly, an informant from Gambella claimed that recruitment efforts for GLFs primarily target the Nuer community, even extending to Nuer refugees from South Sudan.

> GLF uses propaganda messages such as "If you join our army, we will give you 5 thousand birrs; during the training, we will equip you with full armours; if you participate in a military operation, we will give you 50 thousand birrs, and if we capture state power in the future, we will all share the power properly, your struggle will proudly serve your children, your community."[22]

Many young citizens of the state are trapped in a cycle of poverty, unemployment, and a pervasive sense of uncertainty. In such circumstances, these individuals often develop a deep mistrust of the government and are willing to seize any opportunity that comes their way, regardless of the source. The prevailing conditions of poverty and unemployment create a sense of desperation among young people, pushing them towards seeking alternative paths to improve their lives. The lack of viable employment options

survey (2022). Statistical report on the 2022 1st round urban employment unemployment survey.

[19] Gambella Regional State, Peace, and Security Officer. Personal Interview, 2022

[20] Western Gonder Zone, Security, and Peace Office Head, Personal Interview, 2022.

[21] Gonder University Researchers and Central Gonder Zone, Security, and Peace Office Head, Personal Interview, 2022

[22] Gambella Regional State Police Commission. Personal Interview. 2022

and the fear of an uncertain future drive them to explore unconventional avenues for survival and progress. The trust deficit towards the government as a result of meager job opportunities plays a significant role within this context. Young people who have experienced limited support or witnessed systemic failures may develop a sense of disillusionment and skepticism towards official channels. As a result, they may be more inclined to embrace opportunities presented by external actors, even if those opportunities come with their own risks and uncertainties. In this challenging environment, young individuals are driven by a survival instinct and a desire to escape their circumstances. They are compelled to make choices that may not align with conventional norms or established authorities. This underscores the complex interplay between socioeconomic factors, trust dynamics, and the motivations that drive young people to engage with alternative opportunities and actors.

Regional Dynamics and Armed Groups in Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Somalia

In the Horn of Africa, a complex web of interventionism defines interstate relations. Governments frequently engage in proxy conflicts, supporting insurgencies within neighboring countries. Motivations for such actions are multifaceted. Ethnic kinship with rebel groups can drive support, fostering a sense of solidarity. Alternatively, intervention may serve as an extension of foreign policy, aiming to destabilize antagonistic regimes or exploit incomplete state formation to exert regional influence. Ethiopia, as a prominent Horn of Africa state, has faced challenges arising from both forms of intervention.

The rationale behind neighboring countries' support for anti-government armed groups (ANSAs) operating within Ethiopia differs markedly from the reality on the ground. This discrepancy stems from the varying intentions and capabilities of these external actors. While Ethiopia grapples with internal challenges posed by groups like the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BGPLM) and the Gumuz People's Democratic Movement (GPDM), the security situation in the Benshangul-Gumuz region is further complicated by the presence of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project. Ethiopia's proximity to Sudan and the alleged support from Cairo and Khartoum have provided a permissive environment for insurgent activities. As Rift Valley Institute asserted that the Gumuz and Benishangul communities have sought support from successive regimes in Khartoum to reverse their perceived political marginalization. These struggles continue and remain an active dynamic in the relations between Khartoum and Addis. The Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM), received military support from the Sudanese government, via the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), since 2020, which played a role in the uptick of their insurgency in Benishangul-Gumuz, albeit not a decisive one (Rift Valley Institute, 2023). In this regard, local officials and informants allege that the BGPLF, GPDM, Kemant, Oromo Liberation Front-Shene (OLF-Shene), and Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) receive logistical and financial backing from Sudan. Weapons procurement is a common trend, with the

TPLF, Gumuz fighters, OLF-Shene, and Kemant reportedly purchasing arms in Sudan. Egypt is further implicated in financing these activities. Similarly, the same source suggests GPDM receives financial support from Cairo through existing diaspora networks.[23]

Sudan and Egypt have purportedly emerged as critical logistical and financial centers for Kemant and Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) rebels. These countries allegedly facilitate recruitment efforts amongst Sudanese refugees. While Sudan may not exert complete control over the insurgents, it is accused of providing crucial support in the form of weapon maintenance, access to new armaments, direct military assistance, training grounds, passage to Egypt, and both moral and material aid. Local sources further suggest Egyptian involvement in financing these groups. As one informant stated "BGPLF, Kemant, TPLF, and GPDM utilize Sudanese territory as a staging ground for operations. The informant further alleges that TPLF and QLF fighters stationed in Sudanese bases situated near Amdayite conducted repeated attacks against Ethiopia between 2020 and 2022, having presumably received combat training within Sudanese territory."[24]

Sudan's history as a rival state and historical tensions related with border disputes with Ethiopia position it to support Ethiopian insurgents seeking regime change or addressing identity and economic grievances. Despite internal issues, Sudan allegedly

continues to harbor these groups, offering training grounds, weapons markets, and passage for insurgent leaders seeking training and financial aid from Egypt. Sudan's Nile province, in particular, is said to serve as a haven for these insurgents.[25] Coupled with this situation is the alleged lack of a robust chain of command within the Sudanese army and the Khartoum government's inability to control its territory. This creates a permissive environment for insurgent operations. Wealthy individuals and groups are also reported to finance insurgent activities, potentially motivated by profiting from the violence through human trafficking, small arms smuggling, and drug trafficking.[26]

Recognizing Khartoum's alleged indifference, Ethiopian officials at both regional and federal levels have attempted to persuade their Sudanese counterparts to cease support for insurgent movements. However, these efforts have proven to be unsuccessful. According to Ethiopian government officials, unidentified Sudanese government officials even attempted to sabotage the October 2022 peace deal between the Ethiopian government and Gumuz fighters.[27] While most GPDM and Kemant members were disarmed and integrated following the peace agreement, a significant portion continues to involve in violent activities using Sudanese territory as a base. Similarly, unidentified BGPLF members reportedly operate from Sudan despite their peace deal with the Ethiopian

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[23] Supra note 38.
[24] Gonder University Expertise. Personal Interview. 2022.
[25] Benishagul Gumuze President Office Peace and Security Advisor, Supra note 36. Personal Interview. 2022.

[26] Supra note 40.
[27] Benishagul Gumuze President Office Peace and Security Advisor. Personal interview. 2022.

government.[28] The alleged support provided by Sudan's military government to these insurgents directly challenges Ethiopian counter-insurgency efforts.

Khartoum's intervention by proxy is allegedly motivated by a desire to reciprocate Ethiopia's GERD dam construction without approval from downstream countries. Informants suggest that Cairo and Khartoum have forged alliances with these insurgent groups to pressure Ethiopia and halt GERD construction. Intelligence sources claim that Sudanese leader Al-Burhan and Egyptian President Al-Sisi agreed on mutual support against Ethiopia on two key issues: Sudan would support Egypt on GERD, and Egypt would back Sudan's claim to the Al-Fashaga border territory.[29] In fact, recent shifts in relation between Sudan, Ethiopia and,

crucially Egypt, which sees the GERD as a threat to its control over the Nile, has given groups on Ethiopia's western borders greater salience – a tool that can be used as leverage over the government in Addis Ababa (Rift Valley Institute, 2023). In asserting this, an anonymous diplomatic interview source further suggests that "Al-Burhan suspected the Ethiopian government would take military measures against Sudan after winning the war with TPLF. Due to this logic and understanding of the internal situation, Sudan's transitional government demonstrates an ad hoc foreign policy shift of normalizing its relationship with Ethiopia".[30]This tradition of proxy intervention has historically challenged the normalized diplomatic and foreign relations within the region, particularly between Ethiopia and Sudan. These actions further undermine broader regional stability.

Table 1: Insurgent Movements in Ethiopia's Modern History (1961-2020) with Alleged Sudanese Backing

Insurgents in Ethiopia	Tentative Year of Formation	Motivation for mobilization and organization	Regional Backing
Eritrean Liberation Front	1961	Secession	Sudan, Somalia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria

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[28] Supra note 36.
[29] Diplomat. Personal Interview. 2022.

[30] Supra note 45.

Eritrean People's Liberation Front	1972	Secession	Sudan and Saudi Arabia
Tigray People's Liberation Front	1975	Autonomy, change of regime	Sudan
Oromo Liberation Front 1974	1974	Secession	Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea
Western Somali Liberation Front	1976	Secession	Somalia
Gambella Liberation Front (Gambella People's Liberation Movement)	1980 (1985)/2004	Autonomy	Sudan
Benishangul People's Liberation Movement	1970s/1980s/	Secession	Sudan
Ogaden National Liberation Front	1984	Secession	Sudan, Eritrea, and Saudi Arabia
Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia	1986	Secession	Sudan and Saudi Arabia
Oromo and Abo Liberation Front	1991	Secession	Sudan and Saudi Arabia

Issa and Gurgura Liberation Front	1991	Autonomy	Sudan and Saudi Arabia
Ethiopian People's Patriotic Front	1998	Change of regime	Eritrea
Gambella People's Liberation Front	2004	Secession	Eritrea (previously) Sudan and Egypt currently
Kemant Fighters	2014	Autonomy/self-administration	Sudan and Egypt
Oromo Liberation Front-Shenie	2018	Secession	Sudan
Tigray's People Liberation Front	2020	Change of Regime	Sudan and Egypt
The Gumuz Peoples' Democratic Movement (GPDM)	2020	Governance and power claim/representation	Sudan and Egypt

Source: Authors and Berouke, 2017

Table 2: Current Sudanese Support for Ethiopian ANSA Groups

ANSA Group	Motive for Sudanese Support	Form of Support
Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)	Historical ties, Border disputes/resources, Corruption	Logistical support, weapons, training

Kemant Fighters	and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), and Regime change	Financial and logistical support
The Gumuz People's Democratic Movement (GPDM)		Financial and logistical support

Contrary to Sudan experience, South Sudan as a state is not responsible for the vulnerability of the Ethiopian state to the threats of ANSAs'; rather, the reasons and factors in line with South Sudan is beyond its control and central government capacity. For instance, theGambella People's Liberation Movement (GPLM) insurgency in Ethiopia thrives in part due to weaknesses in neighboring South Sudan. South Sudan's long, porous border with Ethiopia's Gambella region (543 miles), coupled with weak governance and a lack of government capacity, creates a haven for the GPLM's activities. This vulnerability is exacerbated by the internal conflicts in South Sudan. The resulting political uncertainty provides an opportunity for the GPLM to establish training camps within South Sudan. Furthermore, the presence of Nuer refugees in Gambella, who fled the South Sudanese civil war, creates a potential recruitment pool for the GPLM.[1]

States with limited governance capacity, characterized by an inability to manage societal disputes in a peaceful and inclusive manner, create a security vacuum. This vacuum attracts a range of actors, both state and non-state, who may resort to violence, at times in a systematic and enduring way, to exert control and pursue their objectives (Tadesse, 2007). In this regard, South Sudan's weak state institutions further empower the insurgency in a spontaneous and sporadic manner in the region. An interview with a senior Ethiopian diplomat in Juba highlights the lack of control over South Sudan's border regions, particularly Eastern Equatorial, Pibor, Jonglei, and Upper Nile, which border Ethiopia. This lack of control allows the GPLM to use South Sudan as a safe haven when attacked and undergone pressure by Ethiopian counter-insurgency operations. In addition to the physical haven inside South Sudan, the easy availability of weapons thereof strengthens the GPLM. In this regard, the Atlantic report that South Sudan's two-years-and-running civil conflict means that the country has been flooded with small arms and light weapons.[2] Weak gun control measures and a thriving illegal arms trade make weapons cheap and accessible. An informant stated that "the source of arms trafficking in Gambella is South Sudan [...] particularly South Sudanese soldiers [...] participate in various illegal

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[1] Gambella Regional State Police Commission. Personal Interview. 2022.

[2]ttps://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/gambella-attack-exposes-ethnic-tensions-between-ethiopia-south-sudan/

activities... guns are sold in any shop, like other items".[3] This easy access to weapons allows the GPLM to not only arm itself but also collaborate with other insurgent groups like the OLF-Shene, as evidenced by their joint operations of 15 June 2022. Interviews with Ethiopian diplomats in South Sudan indicate that the South Sudanese government itself does not actively support any insurgent groups in Ethiopia, rather the government and South Sudan as state are a legitimate friend to Ethiopia[4]. The overall fragility of South Sudan, instead creates an environment conducive to insurgency. As Salehyan (2007) argues, "weak or failed states are ready havens for violent transnational actors". South Sudan's inability to control its territory allows the GPLM to flourish and destabilize neighboring Ethiopia.

Table 3: South Sudan as a Choice for Ethiopian ANSAs'

Issue	Impact on Ethiopian Security
Porous Border	Enables GPLM activity
Internal Conflict	Creates a security vacuum for the GPLM
Refugee Presence	Provides a potential recruitment pool for the GPLM
Weak State Institutions/ Lack of Effective All Territorial Government Control	Hinders border control and empowers insurgents

The threat to the security of the Ethiopian state currently has been wider than the propitious environment for the easy movements of insurgencies in South Sudan and Sudan. The collapse of the Somali state, among others, was due to the repressive nature of the Syad Barre regime and the misguided foreign policy the defunct government pursued toward its neighbors. Although various efforts have been exerted by the neighboring states and the international community to fix the condition and reduce the sources of insecurity following the dismal failure of the state, the security vacuum has attracted the increasing involvement of Islamic Insurgent movements (Ramadane, 2014),

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[3] Formerly Founder of Gambella People's Liberation Movement Social Affairs Advisor for the President of Gambella Regional State. Personal Interview. 2022

[4] Senior Ethiopian Ambassador. Personal Interview. 2022.

such as, Al-Ittihad Al-Islamiya, Union of Islamic Courts and its offspring Al-Shabab, ISIS.

Ethiopia is one of the nations in the Horn of Africa that is most susceptible to transitional terrorist attacks originating from Somalia. The region's proximity to the Middle East indeed accounts for the proliferation of radicalism. Addis Ababa's military incursion and its operation under AMISOM have never completely abolished the threat of attack. Since its establishment, AIAI has launched a terrorist attack on Ethiopia's soil. Currently, al-Shabaab and Daesh pose an imminent security threat to Ethiopia. The political instability in the wake of 2018 has offered an opportunity for the joint effort of these militant groups. After restructuring themselves, passing through rigorous training and capacity building, the Islamic militant group tried replicating the Kenyan experiment.[1]As in Kenya, Al-Shabaab's external military and security operation wing are believed to be operated in Ethiopia. The Islamic militant group recruited Ethiopian origins as its members. Even individuals from Ethiopia who were promoted to middle-level leadership gave the Islamic insurgent a transnational character.

Al-Shabaab is recruiting members and trying to build ties with insurgent movements from Ethiopia. This indicates that Ethiopian youth are increasingly targeted for recruitment. Over the past two years, jobs and Quran education have easily been used to recruit youths, particularly from Somali Regional State. The Islamic insurgency has targeted and identified Elkere and Bale areas as operation sites for several reasons. First, the identified areas are hospitable for the insurgency. Second, weak administration is prevalent in the area. Third, the area is previously hospitable for Islamic insurgency activities. Fourth, the area is proximate to a stronghold of Al-Shabaab. Fifth, the question of political and economic inclusivity is predominant in the area. Sixth, the withdrawal of troops from the border areas has also paved the way for the incursion of terrorist attacks in the area.[2]Likewise, report indicated that Al-Shabaab and Daesh have recruited members from Wollo, Jimma, Bale, Addis Ababa, and the Somali region since 2019. Furthermore, the insurgent has targeted audiences in Ethiopia through different languages: Amharic, Afan Oromo, and Somali. In this regard, pamphlets, radio, and documentaries are used to reach out citizens in Ethiopia.[3]

Aside from the domestic conditions, the regional and international contexts help the threat of Al-Shabaab and Daesh to reach a higher security threat. One of the chief factors for these Islamic militants' rising security risks is the political instability inside Somalia. The political situation inside Somalia has, thus far allowed these groups to fill the security vacuum and maintain "law and order" in the lawless provinces. The second regional factor is related to weak regional coordination among member states to fight terrorism. Indeed, member states of IGAD have developed a regional strategy for preventing and countering terrorism. Nevertheless, weak

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[1] Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA) & Jigjiga University. The threat of terrorism in Horn Africa. Policy Dialogue Unpublished Report. 2023.

[2] Supra note 38

[3] Ibid

coordination between member states causes the fight not to bear fruit. Furthermore, most governments in the region are weak and unstable. This situation provides a fertile ground for the proliferation of terrorism activities in the region. The rising of radical teachings in the region by Extremists also help to exploit the opportunity to recruit youth and mobilize them toward violent extreme goals. This trend indicates home-grown radicalism is growing by reinforcing the regional trend. Another not widely mentioned factor regarding the rise of violent extremism is the seemingly changing global order.

Conclusions

Ethiopia faces a persistent challenge from ANSAs. This phenomenon stems from a complex interplay of domestic and regional factors. Domestically, the weaponization of ethnicity, unequal land distribution, and high unemployment rate are causing grievances and fueling insurgencies. Regionally, historical enmities, proxy warfare, weak state capacity, and the abundance of weaponry in porous border areas provide ANSAs with sanctuaries and opportunities. To achieve lasting stability, Ethiopia must adopt a multi-pronged approach. This includes, addressing ethnic grievances through inclusive dialogue and power-sharing, promoting socio-economic development, strengthening governance, and dismantling elite-insurgent networks. Additionally, regional cooperation is crucial. Collaborative security measures, common legal frameworks to counter ANSAs, and defensive diplomacy are necessary to address the regional dimensions of this challenge. By acknowledging the multifaceted nature of the ANSA problem and implementing a

comprehensive strategy, Ethiopia can create a more secure future for its citizens and the region at large.

The Way Forward

Ethiopia deals with a complicated security environment that includes ongoing threats from armed groups, operating inside the country and external difficulties from neighbors. In order to build a more secure future for Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, this study suggests ways to deal with the country's internal problems and promote regional collaboration.

Ethiopia has to take a multifaceted internal strategy to address the underlying causes of conflict. Programs for social development, social equity, and democratic government by balancing capacity and expectations might help ease the grievances that give rise to insurgency and extremism. Addressing cross-border challenges in the Gambella region requires a multifaceted strategy. Collaboration between religious institutions, civil society organizations, and international partners can solidify peace-building efforts.

Additionally, investing more in military modernization is essential, which includes cutting-edge gear, sophisticated training, and extensive intelligence gathering. A well-trained and equipped force discourages outside aggression and makes counterinsurgency operations more precise and with low-casualty for civilians. Building confidence and cooperation with other states is crucial from a regional perspective. Creating a bilateral information-sharing system with Sudan can help to clear the path for cooperative security projects and lessen miscommunications.

Nonetheless, Ethiopia may have to think about using aggressive diplomacy if negotiations are unable to convince Sudan to stop supporting rebel organizations.

To combat extremism in the Horn of Africa, collaborative surveillance of religious discourse can identify and mitigate radicalization. Targeted job creation programs must address the link between youth unemployment and extremist recruitment.

Robust counterterrorism and counter-radicalization initiatives tailored to the region are also crucial. Prioritizing measures like tackling child abductions, stopping cattle rustling, and including the Murle people in socioeconomic development programs is essential for long-term stability. Supporting South Sudan's transition and strengthening bilateral security cooperation are vital to reduce cross-border criminal activity and bolster regional security.

About the Authors

Gizachew Asrate (PhD)

Dr. Gizachew is a Senior Researcher at the African Affairs Research Directorate at the Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA), Ethiopia. His latest articles include 'The Role of Political Leadership for Economic Growth: practice and Lessons' SN Social Science, Springer Nature (2023); 'The Matrix of Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia' Journal of Ethnicity and Cultural Studies (2022). He can be contacted at gizasrat@gmail.com

Henok Getachew (PhD)

Dr. Henok is a Senior Researcher of the African Affairs (IFA), Ethiopia. His research interest areas are focused on African Union Peacekeeping, Red Sea politics, and Foreign Policy. He presented dozens of conference papers at regional and international conferences in his expertise. He can be found at henokgetachew1983@gmail.com

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