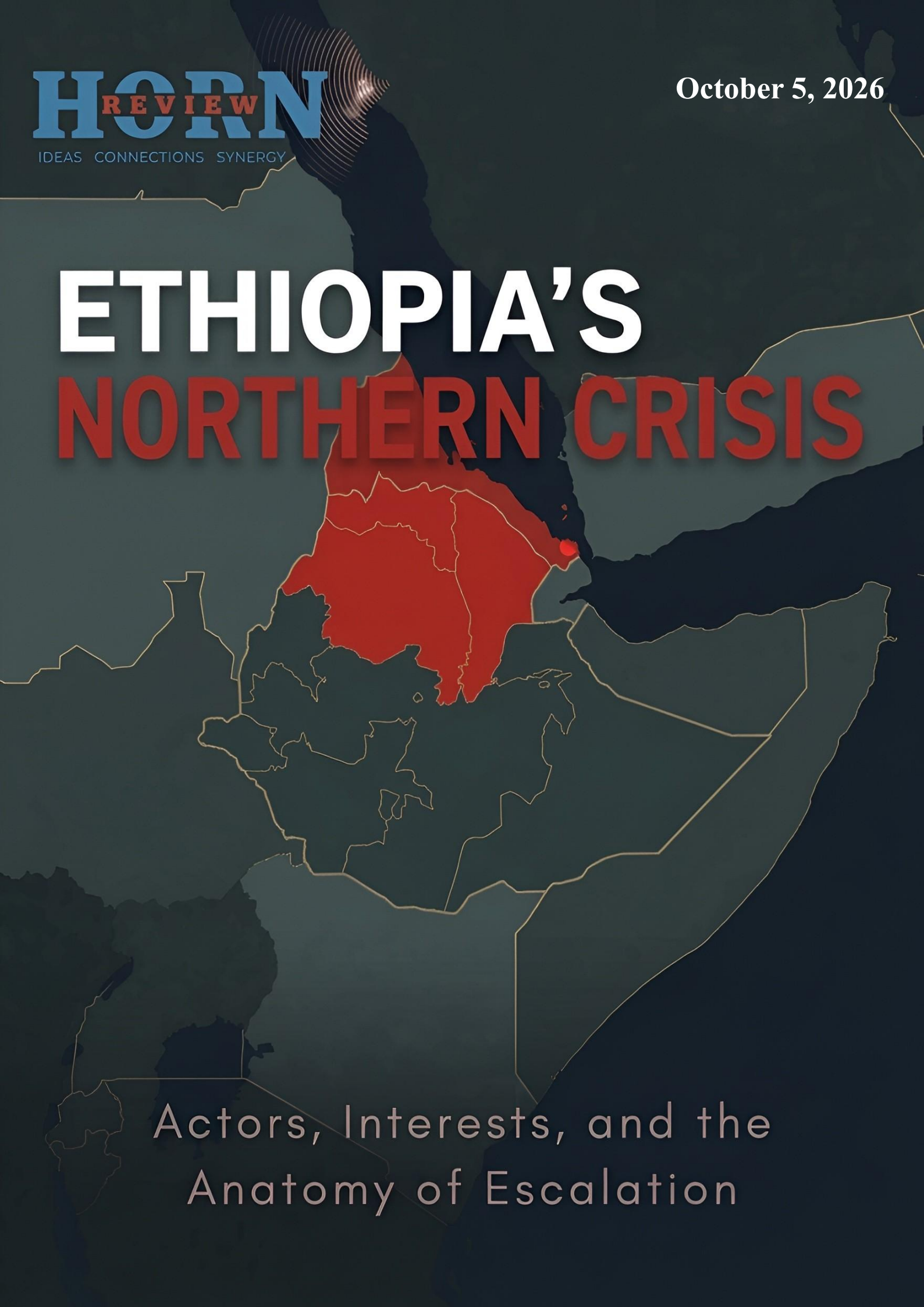


ETHIOPIA'S NORTHERN CRISIS

A map of Ethiopia is shown in a dark teal color. The northern region, including the Amhara, Tigray, and Afar regions, is highlighted in a solid red color. The map also shows the borders of neighboring countries like Sudan, Somalia, and Kenya.

Actors, Interests, and the
Anatomy of Escalation

ETHIOPIA • ERITREA • SUDAN • THE HORN • EGYPT

Ethiopia's Northern Crisis

Actors, interests and the anatomy of escalation

By **Blen Mamo** and **Tsega'ab Amare**

Ethiopia's northern conflict resumed on 23 September 2026, three days after seven armed movements announced an alliance aimed at removing Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government. This report maps the actors behind the breakdown of the Pretoria Agreement, traces the escalation that preceded it, sets out what each party wants and fears, and assesses why regional and international diplomacy failed to prevent it.

October 5, 2026

Operational Indicators

FACTION REALIGNMENT	OFFENSIVE WINDOW	AFAR DISPLACEMENT
7 → 3	3 Days	~150,000
Movements signed the Alliance for Survival; 3 actively fighting in the north.	Elapsed between alliance announcement (20 Sep) and TPLF offensive (23 Sep)	People reported displaced in Afar by 29 Sep; due to the attack by TPLF.

About this Report

This report draws on reporting and analysis available to 5 October 2026, including the International Crisis Group, ACLED, Reuters, Al Jazeera, Critical Threats, The New Humanitarian, Open-Source Intelligence, and Horn Review's own analysis, intelligence, and institutional sourcing.

Three cautions apply throughout. First, access to the conflict zones is restricted, communications in Tigray have been cut, and every party runs an information campaign; casualty figures and claims of territorial control change daily and are rarely independently verified. Second, the report distinguishes between what is documented, what is alleged, and what remains unverified, and uses those terms deliberately.

Spellings of organizations vary across sources. The Afar movement is rendered in English as the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front or the Afar National Unity Revolutionary Front and is widely known as Ugugumo; this report uses "Ugugumo."

Key Findings

01 The Pretoria Agreement broken down in practice, and the federal government attributes the breach to the TPLF. Large-scale fighting began on 23 September across Tigray, Amhara and Afar. Federal forces and the federally aligned Tigray Peace Force reported retaking Alamata on 28 September. The TPLF's forces took over the airports at Mekelle, Axum and Shire, which were still under federal control, and Crisis Group says they replaced the federal police there without a fight. Federal forces and Tigray Peace Force fighters then entered Mekelle on Saturday 3 October, and federal control of the city was confirmed on 4 October. The TPLF called its withdrawal temporary.

02 Responsibility for the first shot is disputed, though Crisis Group places primary responsibility on the TPLF. The International Crisis Group places primary responsibility for the resumption of fighting on the TPLF, which it says chose coordinated assaults on 23 September rather than wait. Federal drone strikes on 22 September preceded that offensive, and the TPLF describes its war as defensive. Counted from the TPLF's removal of the interim administration in April and May, the escalation began months earlier. The chronology of conscription, alliance-building and airport seizures points to the 23 September offensive as the precipitating act. Crisis Group also says the 2020 war began with a TPLF surprise-attack on the army's Northern Command, while Tigrayan accounts describe a federal squeeze that made conflict inevitable.

03 The new "Alliance for Survival" is broader on paper than in the field. ACLED assessed on 29 September that only three of its seven-member movements (the TPLF, the Amhara Fano National Movement (Fano) and the Ugugumo) were actively fighting in the north. However, Fano itself is divided over cooperation with the TPLF and other groups involved.

04 The war's roots lie in what Pretoria left unresolved. Disarmament was incomplete, the status of contested territories, Tselemti and Raya was never settled, hundreds of thousands of displaced Tigrayans remained unable to return, Eritrea was absent from the settlement, and accountability was deferred. Eritrea's opposition to Pretoria and its hostility to Ethiopia's sea-access claim, together with the TPLF's internal conflict and its removal of the interim administration, then converted those grievances into a military build-up.

05 The TPLF is no longer a single actor. The hardline leadership under Debretsion Gebremichael controls the party and the regional government; Getachew Reda, a Pretoria signatory, now advises Abiy; Lt. Gen. Tadesse Werede, whom Abiy installed to run the interim administration, was reportedly detained by TPLF forces on 24 September; and a federally backed Tigrayan formation helped retake Alamata.

06 Eritrea is the pivotal external actor, and the least transparent. Asmara moved from Ethiopia's frontline ally in the Tigray war (2020–22) to a critic of the Pretoria Agreement and then to a partner of the TPLF leadership under the banner of "Tsimdo." Addis Ababa maintains that Asmara finances and coordinates the insurgent alliance; while Eritrea denies any involvement. On 1 October Ethiopia closed its embassy in Asmara and expelled ten Eritrean diplomats, and Eritrea severed diplomatic ties. Allegations of Eritrean military movement now converge on the Afar frontier: Afar's regional leadership says Eritrean forces have crossed in, a pro-government militia commander told the BBC that Eritrean soldiers are on the front lines, and intelligence sources alleges, an intended redeployment of brigades from the Assab–Bure front toward Berahle and Dalul.

07 The Horn of Africa faces a serious risk of regional war. Ethiopia's civil conflict is fusing with Sudan's war, the Nile dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, the Saudi–Emirati rivalry and the Red Sea crisis. Washington lifted sanctions on Eritrea's ruling party and military on 18 September. Addis Ababa now accuses Eritrea, Sudan and Egypt of backing the alliance, and on 1–2 October Ethiopia and Egypt expelled one another's diplomats. On 4 October Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia issued the El-Alamein Declaration, which assigns Red Sea governance exclusively to littoral states, rejects unilateral measures on the Nile and rejects recognition of "Somaliland," and which creates a periodic follow-up mechanism. The text names no state, yet each operative claim bears on a core Ethiopian position: sovereign access to the sea, the operation of the GERD and the January 2024 Somaliland MOU. Sudan's army has reinforced the Blue Nile and Gedaref border areas since May, and Yale's Humanitarian Research Lab reported a vehicle build-up at an Ethiopian base in Asosa in August.

08 Diplomacy was active but unenforceable, and the TPLF rejected the channel that existed. The African Union has called for a return to Pretoria and asked former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo to re-engage; the UN, EU and IGAD have urged restraint. Before 23 September, Obasanjo travelled to Mekelle and the AU, the EU and the US ambassador pressed for dialogue; Horn Review's analysis holds that the TPLF leadership rejected those channels and the National Dialogue. As of 2 October, no ceasefire venue, timetable or monitoring arrangement had been announced. The crisis has instead widened diplomatically. On 1 October Ethiopia closed its embassy in Asmara and declared ten Eritrean diplomats persona non grata, citing Eritrea's "direct and indirect acts of hostility and belligerence"; Eritrea severed ties. Ethiopia and Egypt then expelled one diplomat each, and the AU Commission urged Ethiopia, Eritrea and Egypt to exercise maximum restraint.

Part I. What Happened and What is Wrongly Believed

1.1 Situation summary

Large-scale fighting resumed in northern Ethiopia on 23 September 2026, and the Pretoria Agreement of 2 November 2022 has broken down in practice, and the federal government attributes the breach to the TPLF's removal of the interim administration, its conscription and its alliance with armed groups. The TPLF's forces seized the airports at Mekelle, Axum and Shire, and fighting spread to North Wollo and the Tigray–Afar boundary. Federal forces and the Tigray Peace Force reported retaking Alamata, about 120 km south of Mekelle, on 28 September. The army claims 272 Tigrayan fighters were killed in North Wollo.

The humanitarian effects are growing. Banks and mobile networks shut in Tigray on 26–27 September, a drone strike hit the Tigray TV headquarters, and around 150,000 people were reportedly displaced in Afar by 29 September. Ethiopian Airlines suspended flights on 23 September, and humanitarian agencies warn of access collapse.

The picture shifted again between 30 September and 2 October. A federal counteroffensive along three axes toward Mekelle regained Alamata and reportedly Korem, and ACLED reported that pro-government forces retook the Afar towns of Abala, Erebt and Megale; Critical Threats assessed that the army had largely repelled the rebel offensive. Explosions were heard in Addis Ababa on 30 September–1 October after the government banned drone flights over the capital. On 1 October Ethiopia closed its embassy in Asmara and expelled ten Eritrean diplomats, Eritrea severed diplomatic ties, and Ethiopia and Egypt expelled one another's diplomats. The commander of the Tigray Peace Force claimed on 1–2 October that TPLF forces had been “wiped out,”; TPLF chairman Debretsion Gebremichael acknowledged federal occupation of parts of Tigray and promised a counterattack.

Between 3 and 5 October the diplomatic center of gravity moved to Egypt. On 3 October President Sisi met Eritrea's Isaias Afwerki and Somalia's Hassan Sheikh Mohamud in New Alamein, and the Egyptian presidency said that he reaffirmed support for Eritrea's security, stability, sovereignty and territorial integrity. The same day, Somalia's president told Al Jazeera that Mogadishu does not object to Ethiopia securing commercial access through Somali ports, provided the arrangement is agreed with Somalia. On 4 October the three leaders and Sudan's Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan held a quadrilateral summit and issued the El-Alamein Declaration. Sisi said that cross-border challenges require “a dialogue, not confrontation.” On 5 October the BBC carried a pro-government militia commander's claim that Eritrean soldiers have been involved on the front lines; which BBC had not verified it yet.

On the ground, the same days brought the largest shift of the war. Federal forces and Tigray Peace Force fighters entered Mekelle on Saturday 3 October, and federal control of the city was confirmed on 4 October. The TPLF described its withdrawal as temporary, and its chairman had already promised a counterattack on 2 October. The capture reverses the TPLF's offensive and removes it from its seat of government, but its leadership and forces remain in the field, and the report does not treat it as a final defeat.

Political plans for Tigray have begun to surface. Al Jazeera quotes Abraham Belay, a former head of the interim administration, as saying that a new interim administration and regional elections are planned within months. The sources reviewed carry no federal confirmation of that timetable.

1.2 Four Contested Claims

Early coverage has repeated several points that do not survive scrutiny, examining and correcting these is essential in trying to understand the crisis.

Claim 1: “Eritrea turned on PM Abiy because of the Somaliland port deal.”

The strategic timeline reveals a deeper structural rift. The January 2024 Somaliland memorandum briefly eased Asmara’s anxieties by suggesting Addis Ababa was looking away from the Red Sea. However, Eritrea’s hostility actually hardened much earlier, rooted in its opposition to the 2022 Pretoria Agreement. From the federal perspective, escaping its landlocked “geographic prison” is a legitimate national security imperative; when sea-access diplomacy turns to Eritrean ports, Asmara’s pre-existing containment strategy simply bursts into the open.

Claim 2: “The TPLF refused to disarm.”

The Tigrayan forces surrendered substantial heavy weaponry and demobilized over 60,000 fighters from late 2024, but the process did not complete. The federal government’s position is that the TPLF’s conscription drive breaches Pretoria’s ban on mobilization, and the UN rights chief’s condemnation of forced mass recruitment, including of children, supports that position independently. The TPLF replies that the Nairobi implementation declaration tied total disarmament to the withdrawal of non-federal forces, Eritrean and Amhara troops, a withdrawal that never fully materialized, and it denies that recruitment is forced. The conditionality argument has limits: after the party split the hardline leadership obstructed wider implementation of Pretoria, and the withdrawal condition does not excuse mobilization. Ethiopian officials also allege that regional budgets were used to rebuild security capacity and that gold exports through Eritrea and Sudan helped finance it.

Claim 3: “Seven-armed groups are now fighting Addis Ababa.”

Media reports frequently take the “seven-group alliance” at face value, inadvertently amplifying the alliance’s own messaging. A precise institutional analysis reveals that this coalition is structurally fragmented. Groups like the ONLF’s domestic leadership explicitly distanced themselves from the pact, while western border movements in Benishangul and Gumuz remain inactive in the current theater. However, the federal government’s focus is not on the nominal number of signatories but on what it alleges is a centralized coordination hub in Asmara, a claim Eritrea denies.

Claim 4: “The alliance formed and war followed.”

The narrative that a sudden rebel alliance announcement on September 20 simply triggered a reactive war misreads a year-long trajectory of escalation. The offensive followed an escalating sequence. The TPLF removed the federally mandated Interim Regional Administration in April and May and reinstated its pre-war government, which the federal government calls unconstitutional and which Tadesse Werede said nullified Pretoria. The electoral board had deregistered the TPLF as a party in May 2025. Low-intensity border clashes escalated from January and became major engagements near the Sudanese frontier by August. TPLF’s claim of self-defense should be tested against that chronology and not against declaration alone. Months of mobilization, the restoration of the pre-war government, alliance-building and the seizure of airports preceded the offensive, the TPLF had declined to join the National Dialogue, and it rejected AU-led mediation under Obasanjo. The timing also matters: the offensive came days before the newly elected parliament was due to convene on 5 October to form the next government.

1.3 How the Crisis Developed

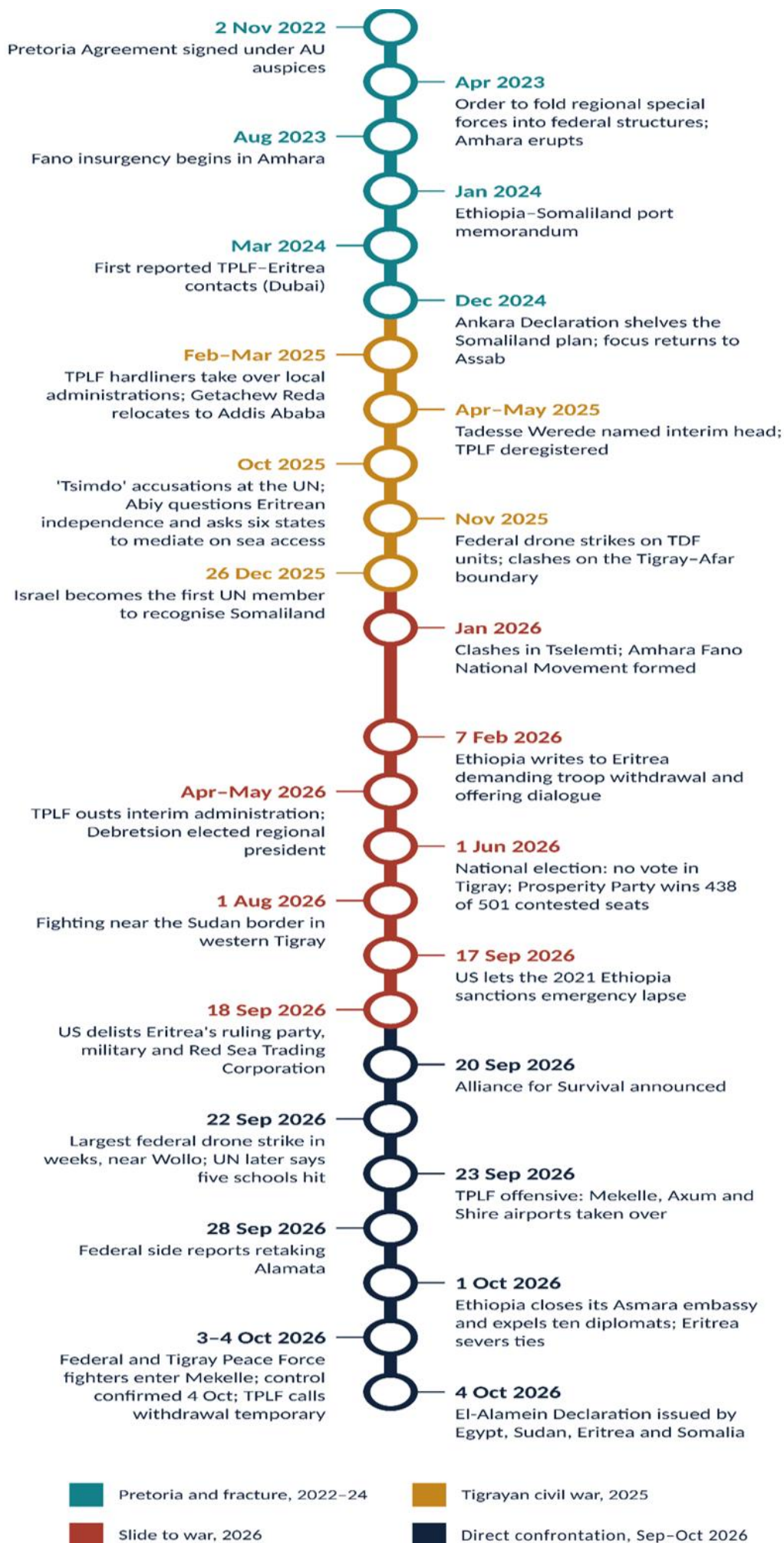


Figure 1. From Pretoria to September 23, 2026, offensive

Compiled from Crisis Group, Al Jazeera, Reuters, ACLED and Critical Threats reporting.

Part II. Why the War Returned

2.1 Background

For almost three decades the Tigray People's Liberation Front led the ruling EPRDF coalition. Eritrea seceded in 1993; the 1998–2000 border war left a hostile frontier and Ethiopia without a coast. Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018, made peace with Eritrea, and in December 2019 merged the other EPRDF parties into the Prosperity Party. The TPLF declined to join, and its leadership withdrew to Mekelle.

War followed in November 2020 after Tigray held its own regional election in defiance of the federal postponement and Tigrayan forces attacked the army's Northern Command. Federal forces, Amhara and Afar regional forces and the Eritrean army fought the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) in a war that saw rapid federal gains, a Tigrayan counteroffensive in 2021 and a federal recovery in late 2021 aided by drones. The AU's mediator Olusegun Obasanjo has put total deaths at around 600,000; other estimates are lower, and no reliable figure exists.

2.2 The Return of War

Three dynamics acting in sequence produced the September offensive. Pretoria's unresolved terms supplied the grievances. The TPLF and the armed opposition fragmented after Pretoria. Regional fusion supplied patrons and removed external restraint. Each chapter opens with its conclusion.

I. Pretoria's unresolved bargain

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Pretoria stopped the first war and left its causes in place. Six unresolved issues carried the settlement's weakness into 2026: Eritrean and Amhara forces outside the deal, the status of contested territories, disarmament tied to a withdrawal that never happened, displacement, deferred accountability and an AU without enforcement tools.

The Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, signed in Pretoria on 2 November 2022 under AU auspices (mediators Olusegun Obasanjo, former Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta and Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka), and the Nairobi military declaration of 12 November stopped the main fighting. They provided disarmament and demobilization, a ban on TPLF mobilization, restoration of federal services, interim regional administration, return of the displaced, an AU monitoring mechanism and transitional justice. The structural weaknesses were visible from the start. Federal policy nonetheless moved toward reintegration: banking, telecommunications, transport and air links to Tigray were progressively restored, and the TPLF's terrorist designation was lifted in 2023.

Table 1. Pretoria's six unresolved issues

Issue	What Pretoria provided	What followed	Effect on the war
Eritrean and Amhara forces outside the deal	Neither was a party. The Nairobi text tied disarmament to their withdrawal.	The withdrawal never occurred, and Eritrean troops remained in parts of Tigray.	Eritrea felt betrayed and turned to the TPLF; Amhara nationalists felt territorial gains were being bargained.
Contested Territories, Tselemti and Raya	Status deferred to constitutional processes.	PM Abiy later floated a referendum. No settlement followed.	The TPLF and Fano both claim those territories, Welkait and Tselemti, which divides the alliance.
Disarmament sequencing	Disarmament and demobilization; a ban on TPLF mobilization.	Tigrayan forces surrendered much heavy weaponry, and over 60,000 former fighters demobilized. The linked withdrawal never happened.	Disarmament without territorial return became a TPLF red line.
Displacement	Return of the displaced.	Hundreds of thousands of displaced Tigrayans could not return.	The hardline leadership invoked the grievance in support of its reading of Pretoria as a surrender.
Accountability	Transitional justice, handled domestically.	The domestic process has produced little, and the UN expert commission's mandate lapsed on 4 October 2023.	No independent body documents abuses.
AU enforcement	An AU monitoring mechanism.	The AU has no coercive tools. The mechanism never became a visible source of pressure.	Violations carried no cost, and the April 2026 statement by Tadesse Werede that the TPLF's move nullified Pretoria drew no high-level AU response.

The agreement also broke Abiy's wartime coalition. Eritrea's President Isaias Afwerki had wanted a more complete defeat of the TPLF, and Amhara nationalists felt their territorial gains were being traded away. Abiy's pursuit of Red Sea access and the TPLF's internal conflict then converted these grievances into a military build-up. The first war began with the TPLF's surprise attack on the army's Northern Command, which had spent nearly two decades securing the Eritrean border; Tigrayan accounts of a federal squeeze do not alter that sequence.

Party	Provision	Alleged conduct	Source and status	Reply on record
TPLF	Article 7: no conscription or mobilization	Forced mass recruitment, including children, since conscription began in 2026	Condemned by the UN rights chief; reported by Reuters and Al Jazeera	TPLF denies that recruitment is forced
TPLF	Article 7: no aid to or collaboration with armed groups	Public alliance with Fano, the OLA, Ugugumo and others, announced 20 September	Alliance documented; extent of military coordination unverified	TPLF calls the alliance insurance against isolation with a political program
TPLF	Article 3: no proxies or collusion with hostile external forces	Alleged Eritrean financing and coordination	Alleged by Addis Ababa; experts told Reuters they find it credible; no public evidence of a logistical pipeline	TPLF and Eritrea deny material support and call the contacts political
TPLF	Interim regional administration	Removal of the interim administration in April and May 2026 and reinstatement of the pre-war government	Documented	Tadesse Werede said in April that the move nullified Pretoria
Federal government	Cessation of operations against TPLF combatants	Drone strikes affecting TDF units were reported in November 2025, and again on 22 September 2026. The UN later said five schools were hit in the 22 September strikes.	Crisis Group, ACLED and the UN. Accounts of individual incidents differ, and responsibility is attributed differently by different sources.	The federal response to it was restraint, limited to military containment and deterrence.
Federal government	Restoration of federal services	Reduced federal budget transfers and fuel supplies to Tigray were reported. A budget subsidy freeze was reportedly lifted in December 2025.	Crisis Group.	Federal government points to restored banking, telecommunications, transport and air links were progressively restored after Pretoria.
Federal and Amhara authorities	Return of the displaced	Hundreds of thousands of displaced Tigrayans could not return	Reported by humanitarian and monitoring organizations. Progress varies by area, and some returns have taken place.	
Eritrea (not a party)	Nairobi: withdrawal of non-federal forces	Eritrean troops remained in parts of Tigray	Documented	Eritrea was not a signatory and denies supporting the alliance

II. Fragmentation inside the camps

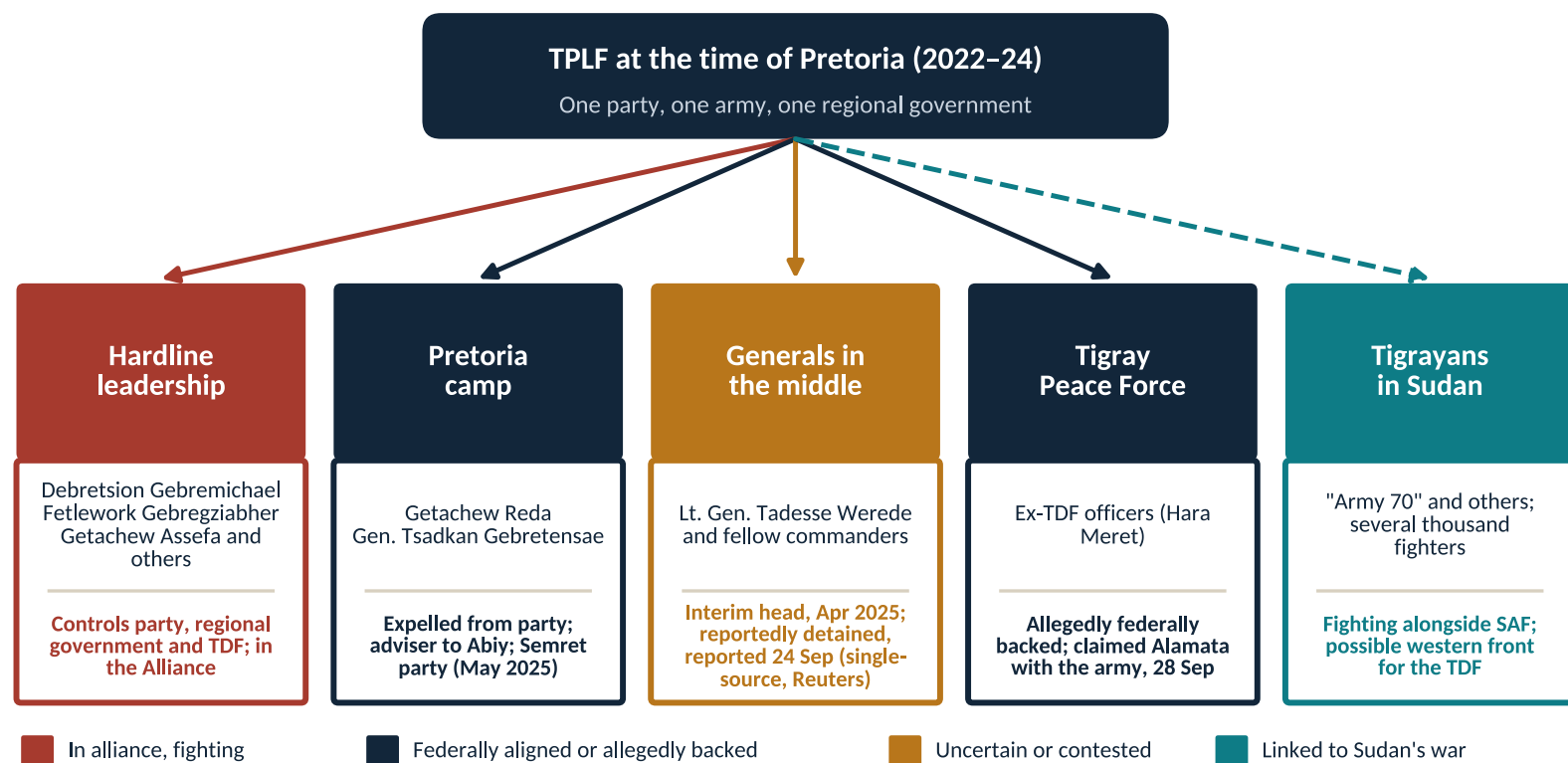
CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The TPLF and the armed opposition fragmented after Pretoria. Fragmentation makes a ceasefire harder to deliver, because commitments by one faction may not bind another.

The TPLF's internal split is the hinge on which the crisis turns. In 2020, isolation produced extraordinary cohesion inside Tigray. In 2026 the pattern has reversed: the TPLF has more outside partners and less unity at home. ACLED's regional analyst has noted that the mobilization of population, diaspora and outside sympathy seen in the first war is absent this time

The split followed a clear sequence. Getachew Reda led the interim administration from March 2023 and became the face of Pretoria implementation. The party's old guard moved against him in 2024; in early 2025 around 200 TDF officers publicly backed his removal, and by March local administrations had been taken over. Abiy responded by installing Tadesse Werede in April 2025, an arrangement that worked briefly. By late April 2026 the TPLF had removed the interim administration entirely. Accounts differ on the date of the split.

Figure 2. The TPLF after the split



Source: Crisis Group, Reuters, Critical Threats, Horn Review Sourcing. Alignments as reported to 30 September 2026.

The strategy carries severe internal costs. Reuters and Al Jazeera report that conscription has produced civilian evasion and anger in a population exhausted by war. The leadership's popular legitimacy has been severely eroded. The UN rights chief has condemned the TPLF's forced mass recruitment and the TPLF denies that recruitment is forced. Furthermore, the reported detentions of senior commanders

suggest that the hardline leadership is forcefully disciplining doubters. Economically, the region remains fundamentally dependent on federal fiscal transfers and trade routes that active warfare threatens to close.

What the TPLF wants from the alliance

TPLF central committee member Addisalem Balema describes the alliance as insurance against the isolation of 2020. He says the program is removal of what the movement calls a personalist government, a transitional authority, a constitutional dialogue and then elections, and he acknowledges unresolved disputes with Amhara forces over disputed territories, to be handled by dialogue. He denies any military or logistical support from Eritrea or Sudan, describing the contacts as political. The stated program is regime change, and the airport seizures, alliance-building and multi-front pressure are best read as a route to it rather than as defensive moves.

The Tigrayan civil war and the takeover of Mekelle, 2025

Date	Development
Jan 2025	Roughly 200 senior TDF officers publicly back removal of the Getachew administration.
Feb–Mar 2025	Pro-DebreTSION forces take over local administrations; Getachew and Gen. Tsadkan Gebretensae relocated to Addis Ababa.
Apr 2025	Abiy appoints TDF commander Lt. Gen. Tadesse Werede to head the interim administration; Getachew becomes an adviser to the prime minister.
May 2025	The electoral board deregisters the TPLF and registers Getachew’s new Tigray Democratic Solidarity Party (Semret).
2025	The Tigray Peace Force (Hara Meret), allegedly federally backed, splits from the TDF and operates along the Tigray–Afar boundary.
Jun 2025	Foreign Minister Gedion Timothewos writes to diplomatic missions accusing the TPLF of coordinating with Eritrea.
Sep 2025	The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is inaugurated.
Oct 2025	A TPLF conference welcomes “people-to-people” ties with Eritrea; Ethiopia writes to the UN accusing Asmara and the TPLF of organizing “Tsimdo”; Abiy says no official record exists of the decision that left Ethiopia landlocked.
Oct 2025	PM Abiy asks the United States, China, Russia, the EU, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to mediate on sea access.
Nov 2025	Clashes between the Tigray Peace Force and the TDF on the Afar boundary; federal drone strikes on TDF units.
Dec 2025	Federal subsidies to Tigray reportedly restored after a freeze.

The slide to war, 2026

Date	Development
Jan 2026	TDF-aligned forces clash with federal and Amhara forces in Tselemti; Ethiopia says it intercepted Eritrean ammunition destined for Fano; Fano factions form the Amhara Fano National Movement (AFNM).
Feb 2026	Ethiopia writes to Eritrea demanding the withdrawal of troops it says occupy Ethiopian territory, calls this aggression and offers dialogue.

Mar 2026	PM Abiy warns that any further Eritrean attempt would be Eritrea's last.
Apr–May 2026	The TPLF ousts the interim administration and reinstates a Defacto regional government; Tadesse says this nullifies Pretoria; the regional council elects Debretsion president; conscription begins.
May 2026	A “people-to-people” gathering involving alliance-linked figures in Port Sudan.
1 Jun 2026	National election: Prosperity Party wins 438 of 501 contested seats; no vote in Tigray; polling suspended in parts of Amhara and Oromia; Fano and the OLA reject the process.
6 Jun 2026	Army chief Field Marshal Birhanu Julia publicly denounces “Tsimdo.”
18 Jun–Jul 2026	The US announces visa restrictions on hardline TPLF members (18 June); the regional assembly in Mekelle passes troop-mobilization legislation and sets up a command post under Debretsion; in July US Ambassador Massinga visits Mekelle and the TPLF leadership condemns his remarks
1 Aug 2026	Fighting near the Sudanese border in Shererina.
17–18 Sep	17 Sep: The US allows the 2021 sanctions emergency on Ethiopia to expire. 18 Sep: The US delists Eritrea's ruling party, military and Red Sea Trading Corporation.
20 Sep	Alliance for Survival announced.
22 Sep	Largest federal drone strike in weeks, near Wollo. The UN later says ENDF strikes hit five schools that day.
23 Sep	TPLF offensive; Mekelle, Axum and Shire airports taken over; fighting in North Wollo and on the Tigray–Afar boundary; Ethiopian Airlines suspends flights; AU statement.
24 Sep	AU asks Obasanjo to re-engage; Reuters reports four senior Tigrayan commanders, including Tadesse, detained; the army claims 272 Tigrayan fighters killed in North Wollo.
25 Sep	Intelligence sources report that Eritrea moved brigades drawn from its 44th, 67th and 38th Divisions from the Assab–Bure front toward Berahle and Dalul in Ethiopia's Afar region
26–27 Sep	Tigrayan forces and Ugugumo take Erebt in Afar; drone strike on the Tigray TV headquarters; AFNM-aligned fighters clash with another Fano command over TPLF cooperation; banks and mobile networks shut in Tigray.
28 Sep	Federal forces and the Tigray Peace Force report retaking Alamata, about 120 km south of Mekelle; Field Marshal Birhanu's accusation that Eritrea, Sudan and Egypt back the opposition is reported (Crisis Group dates the remarks to 25 September).
29–30 Sep	Fighting continues on several fronts; around 150,000 reportedly displaced in Afar; the Afar governor alleges Eritrean forces are taking part; the UAE condemns the TPLF offensive while Qatar calls for respect for Pretoria.
30 Sep–1 Oct	Federal forces advance to within about 40 km of Mekelle, according to Al Jazeera's reporter in Afar; explosions are heard in Addis Ababa after a ban on drone flights over the capital, and an alliance-linked source claims drone strikes on the city.
1 Oct	Ethiopia closes its embassy in Asmara and declares ten Eritrean diplomats, including the chargé d'affaires, persona non grata; Eritrea severs diplomatic ties. Ethiopia also expels an Egyptian diplomat. The AU Commission urges Ethiopia, Eritrea and Egypt to show maximum restraint.
2 Oct	Egypt expels an Ethiopian embassy counsellor in reciprocity. ACLED reports pro-government forces retaking Abala, Erebt and Megale in Afar; the Tigray Peace Force commander claims TPLF forces have been “wiped out” (unverified); Debretsion acknowledges federal occupation of parts of Tigray and promises a counterattack.

3 Oct	Federal forces and Tigray Peace Force fighters enter Mekelle; the TPLF later calls its withdrawal temporary.
3 Oct	Sisi meets Isaias Afwerki and Hassan Sheikh Mohamud in New Alamein; the Egyptian presidency reaffirms support for Eritrea's security and territorial integrity. Somalia's president says Somalia does not object to Ethiopian commercial access through Somali ports if agreed with Somalia.
4 Oct	Federal control of Mekelle is confirmed.
4 Oct	Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia issue the El-Alamein Declaration: Red Sea governance is the exclusive responsibility of littoral states; unilateral measures harming the existing water uses of the downstream Nile states are rejected; recognition of "Somaliland" is rejected; a periodic follow-up mechanism is created.
5 Oct	BBC reports a pro-government militia commander's claim that Eritrean soldiers have fought on the front lines; the BBC has not verified it.

Part III. The Actors

3.1 The Federal Camp

3.1.1 Interests and Posture

The federal government's overriding interest is the continuity of the state and the constitutional order, which face an armed coalition whose declared program is to remove the government. Around that core sit several others: securing the Djibouti–Semera corridor, protecting the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and the IMF-backed reform program (a \$3.4 billion facility approved in July 2024); and pursuing the Red Sea access that Prime Minister Abiy has made a signature national aim.

The Afar offensive targets the Djibouti–Semera corridor, through which more than 90 percent of Ethiopia's trade moves. This is the federal government's strongest security argument, and it holds however one dates the start of the war, because a sustained threat to that road endangers the state's economy and not only one region. ACLED reported on 2 October that pro-government forces had retaken the Afar towns of Abala, Erebt and Megale.

The government enters the war with considerable advantages. Crisis Group puts Ethiopia's ground forces at around 600,000, against an Eritrean army estimated at fewer than 200,000, and the federal side holds a decisive edge in drones. The structural advantage lies with Ethiopia, and in any renewed confrontation with Eritrea the larger risk is the collapse of the Eritrean state rather than the fighting itself.

The federal government's position is that it faces a foreign-backed insurgency. In late September (reported from 28 September; Crisis Group's Crisis Watch dates the remarks to 25 September) Field Marshal Birhanu Jula accused Eritrea of financing and arming opposition groups and alleged that Sudan and Egypt were also backing them; all three governments deny or dismiss the claim, and no public evidence has been offered. The army chief also promised "restraint," while the TPLF says federal forces

have launched a “full-scale” combined offensive of infantry, mechanized units and drones. Addis Ababa has so far chosen diplomacy and containment over direct action against Eritrea or Sudan, a restraint that denies Asmara the confrontation it appears to seek.

3.1.2 Federal and Federally Aligned Actors

Actor	Key figures	Core interests	Current position
Federal government	PM Abiy Ahmed; FM Gedion Timothewos; spokesperson Billene Seyoum	Government continuity; central control; Red Sea access; GERD; economy	Frames the war as a foreign-backed insurgency; relies on drones and mobilization; ground forces entered Mekelle on 3 October
Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF)	Field Marshal Birhanu Jula	Hold the Djibouti corridor and the Amhara highlands; preserve drone superiority	Reports ground regained around Sekota and Alamata, and entered Mekelle with the Tigray Peace Force on 3 October; operating on several fronts
Getachew Reda and the Semret party	Getachew Reda; Gen. Tsadkan Gebretensae (aligned)	Displace the TPLF hardliners as Tigray’s interlocutor with Addis	Adviser to Abiy; blames the TPLF for the war; little visible base in Tigray
Tigray Peace Force (Hara Meret)	Former TDF officers	Remove the TPLF from Mekelle	Armed, federally aligned; claimed Alamata with the army on 28 September and entered Mekelle on 3 October
Amhara regional forces and militias	Regional special forces, Tekeze Guard, local militias	Retain (Welkait) and Tselemti	Act as auxiliaries in the west; uneasy over the TPLF’s alliance with Fano
Afar regional government	Regional administration	Defend the region and the Djibouti road	Under attack from Tigrayan forces and Ugugumo; governor alleges Eritrean involvement

3.2 Tigray – Factions

Five Tigrayan actors matter, alongside a civil-society constituency of demobilized fighters, veterans, youth and opposition parties that want jobs, compensation and the return of the displaced. Reuters and Al Jazeera report conscription pressure and attempts to avoid it, which the TPLF denies is forced.

Faction	Principal figures	Position
Hardline leadership	Debretsion Gebremichael (party chair and regional president); Fetlework Gebregziabher; Getachew Assefa; Alem Gebrewahid; Amanuel Assefa	Treats Pretoria as a surrender document; Controls the party and the de facto regional government; in June 2026 the regional assembly passed mobilization legislation and set up a command post under Debretsion. Horn Review assesses that its aims include renegotiating Pretoria from a stronger position and, with the Alliance for Survival, removing the federal government. Withdrew from Mekelle on 3–4 October and called the withdrawal temporary.

Pretoria camp	Getachew Reda; Gen. Tsadkan	Favors cooperation with Addis Ababa as the route to reconstruction; expelled from the party; now in Addis Ababa
The generals in the middle	Lt. Gen. Tadesse Werede and fellow commanders	Tadesse was appointed by Abiy as a compromise figure and initially leaned toward the hardliners; he said in April that reinstating the pre-war government would nullify Pretoria; Reuters reports he and three other veteran commanders who doubted the new war were detained on 24 September
Tigray Peace Force	Ex-TDF fighters and officers	Armed rival of the TPLF; federally aligned. Entered Mekelle with federal forces on 3 October.
Tigrayans in eastern Sudan	Several thousand fighters stranded during the first war, known as Army 70	Have fought alongside the Sudanese army; Crisis Group's sources say the TDF would hope for a simultaneous attack from that direction in any move on Western Tigray
Civil society, veterans, youth	Demobilized fighters, opposition parties	Want jobs, compensation and the return of the displaced; Reuters and Al Jazeera report conscription pressure and attempts to avoid it, which the TPLF denies is forced

3.3 The Alliance for Survival

On 20 September seven movements announced the Ethiopian Peoples' Forces Alliance for Survival. Al Jazeera reports that the negotiations took roughly a year. The stated program is to remove the Abiy government, form a transitional authority, convene a national dialogue and hold elections.

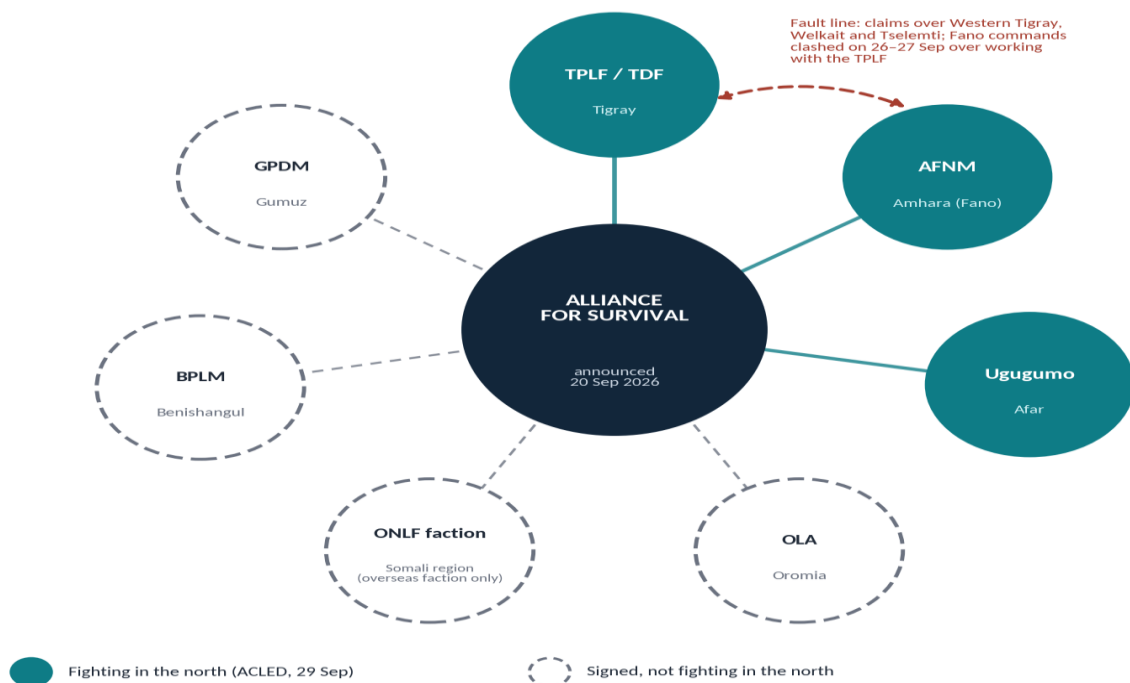


Figure 3. Who signed, and who is fighting

The structural volatility of these anti-government alignments is most visible in the Amhara theater. The Fano insurgency, triggered by the April 2023 directive to dissolve regional special forces, attempted to unite under the AFNM in January 2026. However, on September 26–27, AFNM-aligned fighters engaged in violent, fratricidal clashes with a rival Fano command over the strategic liability of cooperating with the TPLF.

3.3.1 Members

Member	Base	Aims	Contribution	Fault lines
TPLF / TDF	Tigray	Remove Abiy; restore a federal role; control Welkait-Tsegede-Setit-Humera Zone; regional autonomy	The alliance’s only conventionally organized force; control of Tigray’s airports	Internal split; conscription backlash; reported purge of doubters
Amhara Fano National Movement (AFNM)	Amhara	End Abiy’s rule; secure Amhara territorial claims, including Welkait	Insurgent reach across Amhara; capacity to open a second front	On 26–27 September AFNM-aligned fighters clashed with another Fano command (the Belay Zeleke Command) over cooperation with the TPLF; historic mistrust of Tigray and Eritrea
Oromo Liberation Army (OLA)	Oromia	Oromo self-determination; end of Abiy’s rule	A long-running insurgency that ties down federal troops in Ethiopia’s largest region	Leader Jaal Marroo has called the pact a “procedural consensus,” not a settled vision; 2023 talks with Addis failed.
ONLF (overseas faction)	Somali region	Declares the 2018 peace deal void; backs Abiy’s removal	Symbolic breadth	Leadership inside Ethiopia disavows membership.
Ugugumo	Afar	Afar political and territorial claims	Fights alongside the TDF on the Afar boundary; a threat to the Semera–Djibouti road	Afar politics are divided; reported to hold several districts.
Benishangul People’s Liberation Movement (BPLM)	Benishangul -Gumuz	Local autonomy and grievances	Geographic presence near the Sudan frontier	Not active in the northern fighting
Gumuz People’s Democratic Movement (GPDM)	Benishangul -Gumuz	Local autonomy and grievances	As above	Has denied joining, saying it has no armed wing

3.3.2 An Alliance of Convenience

Several features limit the alliance’s cohesion. There is no evidence of a joint command; the Tigrayan, Afar and Amhara elements say they coordinate military strategy, but the OLA and others remain geographically distant. The members hold conflicting territorial aims: the TPLF and Fano both claim, Welkait and Tselemti, and Fano’s own commands disagree over whether to cooperate at all. The

members also disagree about the political endpoint. The TPLF seeks a restored place in a reformed federation; the OLA and ONLF factions prefer a more radical devolution; and an external patron such as Eritrea has an interest in a weaker Ethiopia, not a reformed one. The deeper weakness is that the alliance’s strategic direction is shaped by interests that are not those of its members. Ethiopian grievances are being instrumentalized by outside actors pursuing a different regional agenda, and a coalition without a common end-state, command structure or national legitimacy cannot turn pressure into a sustainable outcome.

Oromia. The OLA insurgency continues, while the Oromo Liberation Front, from which the OLA split, returned to legal politics and announced plans to contest the 2026 election, showing the Oromo opposition is itself divided.

- The ONLF’s split is the most consequential question; if the internal leadership holds its line the alliance’s claim to breadth is thin.
- **Addis Ababa’s political opposition.** Prominent critics have been imprisoned, exiled or sidelined, and several parties boycotted or rejected the June election.
- **Eritrean opposition groups hosted in Ethiopia,** including Brigade N’hamedu, which Asmara regards as a threat.

3.4 Eritrea: The Pivotal and Least Transparent Actor

3.4.1 The Arc of Eritrean Policy

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Eritrea decides whether the war stays internal or becomes interstate, and public evidence about Asmara is the thinnest of any actors. A rapprochement with the TPLF leadership is documented. The formal rupture of 1 October, the reported force movements toward the Afar frontier and the El-Alamein Declaration of 4 October make the situation more confrontational and shift the question from whether Eritrea is aligned to what the alignment is for.

Period	Eritrean position	Principal driver
2018–2020	Reconciles with Ethiopia by PM Abiy after two decades of “no war, no peace”	End of isolation; shared hostility to the TPLF
2020–2022	Fights alongside the federal army in Tigray	Destroy the TPLF
Nov 2022	Excluded from Pretoria	Sense of betrayal; Eritrean troops remain in parts of Tigray
2023–2025	Breaks with Abiy; Addis Ababa accuses Asmara of arming Fano	Red Sea rhetoric and fear for Assab
Mar 2024 onward	Opens contact with TPLF hardliners; open “Tsimdo” engagement by 2025	Deny Addis Ababa a compliant Tigray; hedge against isolation; keep Ethiopia off balance
2025–26	Aligns with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Sudanese army; relations with the UAE sour	Sudan war and Gulf rivalry

18 Sep 2026	US lifts sanctions on the ruling party, military and Red Sea Trading Corporation	Washington's Red Sea security needs
1 Oct 2026	Severs diplomatic ties after Ethiopia closes its Asmara embassy and expels ten Eritrean diplomats	Reciprocity; rejection of the Ethiopian security case
3–4 Oct 2026	Isaias meets Sisi and joins the El-Alamein summit and Declaration with Egypt, Sudan and Somalia	Convert bilateral alignments into a standing legal frame for Red Sea governance

The US delisting of 18 September and Saudi moves toward Asmara belong to a wider Red Sea security picture shaped by the Houthi campaign and the Iran war. The sources reviewed ties the delisting to Washington's Red Sea security needs but record no on-the-record statement of that reasoning, so the link remains an inference.

3.4.2 Eritrean interests

Regime survival - Isaias Afwerki has long treated a strong, centralized Ethiopia as a standing threat regardless of who governs it. Analysts differ on intent. This report reads Asmara as preferring a lasting weakening of the Ethiopian state, and as the senior partner in Tsimdo, while Crisis Group reads, Asmara's posture as defensive, using proxies to overstretch Addis Ababa rather than pursuing a war it cannot win. Both agree on the instrument, which is Ethiopian opposition groups.

Assab and the coast - Abiy has said that Ethiopia will not fight Eritrea for sea access. However his repeated statements that the loss of the Red Sea must be "corrected," his questioning of the legality of Eritrean secession, and reported remarks are the threats Asmara perceives. Ethiopia's stated record on sea access is wider than the "correct the mistake" remarks. In October 2025 he asked the United States, China, Russia, the EU, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to mediate. On 7 February 2026 the government wrote to Eritrea demanding the withdrawal of troops it says occupy Ethiopian territory, calling their presence aggression and offering dialogue. In March 2026 Abiy also warned that any further Eritrean attempt would be Eritrea's last. Both strands belong in any account of how Asmara reads Addis Ababa's intent.

A buffer on the southern frontier - A TPLF-run Tigray that is not subordinate to Addis Ababa serves that purpose. It is one part of a wider buffer-zone strategy that links the Red Sea coast, eastern Sudan and Tigray into a single theatre, in which Asmara cultivates armed and political partners so that hostile forces cannot consolidate near its borders.

Gold and trade - Crisis Group reports that Tigrayan gold is exported through Eritrea, deepening mutual dependence.

Sudan - Eritrea supports the Sudanese army and has trained allied militias in eastern Sudan to keep the Rapid Support Forces away from its western frontier, and it resents the UAE's expanding footprint in the region, including its earlier base at Assab (2015–19).

3.4.3 Reading the Eritrea Strategy

This report's reading of Eritrean strategy rests on several arguments: that Tsimdo grew from Dubai contacts in 2024 into open meetings by 2025; that Isaias regarded Pretoria as a federal compromise that

rescued the TPLF from destruction; that Eritrea runs an information campaign to delegitimize Ethiopia's maritime claim; and that Tsimdo is a serious near-term threat but not a durable alliance because its members' end-states conflict. Intelligence reporting from September 2026 further alleges that the TPLF leadership is purging commanders who oppose remilitarization or accommodation with Asmara. It also argues that the strategic insulation Asmara derived from a TPLF-run Tigray is eroding as federal forces advance, and that Eritrean activity around the Assab–Bure front is intended as a second point of pressure on Ethiopia. The fall of Mekelle sharpens this. If the ENDF consolidates northern Tigray and reaches the Eritrean frontier, Asmara must either adapt to the loss of its buffer and pull its forces back to its border or try to preserve the buffer by crossing into Ethiopia, which would be an unlawful intervention. Either way the northern war becomes more favorable to Ethiopia and more dangerous for the region, and the next battles around northern Tigray and the Assab–Bure front may matter more than the capture of Mekelle itself.

Two further claims are not confirmed by the sources reviewed. The first is that Eritrean forces have already crossed at Zalambesa, which would exhaust the logic of Ethiopian restraint. The second is that Asmara's calculus has an Egyptian dimension, tied to Cairo's position in the Horn, the Nile Basin and the Red Sea.

The broad sequence of the rapprochement and the incompatibility argument are consistent with Crisis Group and Al Jazeera reporting, and the purge allegation is consistent with Reuters' account of the 24 September detentions. More specific claims about named individuals and covert operations rest on intelligence sources. The Alliance for Survival emerged from planning engineered in Asmara, with consultations there in August 2026 that included Debretsion, and his public remark that the TPLF now has allies.

Eritrea's own position is that it does not support Ethiopian armed groups and that Ethiopia's maritime ambitions threaten its sovereignty. Pro-Eritrean outlets present Tsimdo as popular reconciliation between two peoples. No fresh official Eritrean statement on the present fighting beyond denials relayed by others was found.

3.4.4 What is Known, Alleged and Unproven

Although Ethiopia accused Asmara of providing direct material support including finance, intelligence, and arms to the alliance, these claims remain independently unproven, however, independent experts told Reuters they find the federal government's claims credible. The dispute culminated in a diplomatic rupture on October 1, 2026, when Ethiopia announced the closure of its embassy in Asmara. Citing "direct and indirect acts of hostility and belligerence," Addis Ababa declared ten Eritrean diplomats, including the chargé d'affaires, persona non grata for activities threatening national security. Eritrea's information minister stated that the expulsions effectively closed the Asmara embassy in Addis Ababa. Denying the accusations as "astounding," Eritrea subsequently severed all diplomatic ties.

These supports include Ethiopia's January 2026 claim of intercepting an Eritrean ammunition shipment bound for Fano insurgents, reports of an Eritrean troop buildup near the Afar border and Red Sea approaches, and remarks attributed to Ethiopia's deputy army chief about retaking Assab.

3.4.5 Reported Force Movements Toward the Afar Frontier

A cluster of allegations places Eritrean military capacity on the Afar frontier. On 25 September intelligence reporting alleged an intended redeployment of brigades, composed of elements of the 44th,

67th and 38th Divisions, from the Assab–Bure front toward the Northern Red Sea Zone, specifically the districts of Berahle and Dalul in Ethiopia’s Afar region.

Open-source claims since late September go further and assert Eritrean entry along the Assab–Bure axis, but no independent source confirms an advance toward Adigrat. If Eritrean forces are on Ethiopian soil, the federal government would present an operation to remove them as defensive, and that framing would carry weight once the presence is independently verified.

Afar’s regional leadership has said that Eritrean soldiers crossed into the region, and on 5 October a pro-government militia commander told the BBC that Eritrean soldiers have been involved on the front lines. Geography explains why the reports matter before they are verified. The Assab–Bure axis is the shortest line between Eritrea’s southern coast and the Semera–Djibouti corridor, through which more than 90 percent of Ethiopia’s trade moves, and Berahle and Dalul sit on the Afar side of that approach. A force posture there would threaten the corridor, tie federal units to a second axis while the Tigray front remains active and bind the war to the port question that both capitals treat as existential.

A second-order point concerns misreading. If Eritrean forces are on Ethiopian soil, an operation to remove them is a defensive act. Asmara can nonetheless be expected to read any operation along the Assab–Bure axis through the port question, and the El-Alamein Declaration gives it a ready legal vocabulary for doing so. Misreading intent, more than any single deployment, is the main escalation risk on this frontier.

3.5 Sudan: A Second War Fused to the First

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Sudan’s war touches Ethiopia’s northern war at four points, and an “ecosystem” of overlapping networks narrows Ethiopia’s options without any formal alliance. The allegation that Ethiopia supports the RSF comes from Sudan, denied by Addis Ababa. The allegation rests on unnamed sources and cuts against Ethiopia’s own incentives, and Sudan’s army has institutional reasons to internationalize a war it cannot end. The report treats it as unproven.

3.5.1 The Connection Points

Sudan’s war pits the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) under Mohamed Hamdan “Hemedti” Dagalo. It touches the northern war at four points:

- **Tigrayan fighters in the Sudanese army** - Several thousand Tigrayans stranded during the first war, including the force known as Army 70, have fought alongside SAF. Addis Ababa fears they could return to reinforce the TDF or strike from the west. Army 70 operates from bases in eastern Sudan with the support of the Sudanese army and that the TPLF used it to encircle the Shererina attack in early 2026.
- **Rival camps** - Eritrea, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are aligned with SAF. The UAE is widely reported to back the RSF, which it denies
- **Al-Fashaga and the western frontier** - The border plain that Sudan retook in 2020–21 remains a latent flashpoint, and fighting broke out near the Sudanese border in Shererina on 1 August.

3.5.2 Recent Diplomacy

Burhan's deputy Malik Agar met Abiy in Djibouti on 9 May. Burhan has since visited Asmara twice, and Hemedti reportedly visited Addis Ababa in late August. In late September Malik Agar said Sudan does not want war with Ethiopia, while Field Marshal Birhanu accused Sudan, Egypt and Eritrea of backing the opposition, an accusation Khartoum calls baseless. Several figures from groups now in the alliance attended a "people-to-people" meeting in Port Sudan in May.

3.5.3 Analysis of Sudan

A clear roadmap of how the official Ethiopian strategic narrative has evolved throughout 2026.

Initially, in February and March, the core argument challenged Sudanese allegations of Ethiopian support for the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on the grounds of strategic logic. Facilitating an RSF victory would be fundamentally counterproductive for Addis Ababa, as a destabilized Blue Nile directly threatens western Ethiopia's security. Furthermore, these initial accusations originated from a Sudanese military faction with a clear institutional interest in internationalizing its domestic conflict. By May, however, the focus shifted toward the tangible regional dangers posed by Tigrayan ex-combatants serving within the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the expanding web of external inputs sustaining the border war.

By September, this narrative matured into the concept of an integrated **"ecosystem."** This framework argues that tightening SAF-Eritrea ties, Tigrayan networks inside Sudan, and active fighting along the Blue Nile frontier collectively form an overlapping environment that narrows Ethiopia's strategic options, even in the absence of a formal, unified alliance. Crucially, this perspective cautions against the oversimplification that Eritrea is merely using Sudan as a direct lever against Addis Ababa.

3.5.4 What Sudan's parties want

SAF wants to keep Eritrea and Egypt as rear-area partners, retain Tigrayan manpower and share Cairo's leverage over the Nile dispute; its public line is de-escalation. Analysts note that long-range RSF drones could threaten SAF supply lines from Port Sudan toward Eritrea and Tigray. The burden of de-escalation has not been shared evenly: Sudan's troop concentrations and rhetoric are escalatory choices, while Ethiopia has largely absorbed pressure without mirroring it.

3.6 Egypt: the Nile, the Red Sea and the Pressure on Ethiopia

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Egypt is the most capable outside state in Ethiopia's regional rivalries and Cairo has the motive (a decade-old dispute over the Nile), the means (military facilities in four of Ethiopia's neighbors) and a documented alignment with Eritrea, Sudan's army and Somalia in an effort to contain Ethiopia's growing influence in the Horn of Africa. The expulsions of 1–2 October showed how quickly the Nile dispute has become part of the war, and the El-Alamein Declaration of 4 October gives that linkage a formal regional frame.

3.6.1 Interests and instruments

Egypt's core interest is the security of the Nile flow. Cairo depends on the river for nearly all of its fresh water, and more than 80 percent of the water reaching Egypt comes down the Blue Nile, on which Ethiopia built the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), inaugurated in September 2025. While Egypt and Sudan's military leadership have long sought a project-specific, legally binding agreement

to regulate the dam's long-term operations, Ethiopia has maintained that such structural mandates could unduly restrict its future energy independence. Instead, Addis Ababa advocates for basin-wide management through the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) and the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) which entered into force on October 13, 2024, frameworks that downstream nations have largely rejected due to concerns over colonial era water quotas, which Ethiopia was never a part of. The dispute worsened this summer when Addis Ababa announced plans for three further Blue Nile dams and called them a sovereign right; Egypt reacted angrily but has not said how it would prevent them. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi said this week that Egypt is leaving space for diplomacy and peaceful solutions, but not at the expense of its existence. Cairo has never openly spoken of military action against Ethiopia. Reporting from Cairo describes a three-year effort to isolate landlocked Ethiopia so that it becomes more flexible in any future negotiation on the dam.

3.6.2 The military footprint around Ethiopia

Somalia - Egypt signed a defense agreement with Somalia in August 2024 that allowed up to 10,000 Egyptian troops, part of them within the African Union mission. Reporting from Cairo this week puts the contingent at about 15,000 and says it may grow to about 30,000, with a base in Middle Shabelle, including Cisiley airfield, being upgraded; these figures come from unnamed sources and are unconfirmed. Ethiopia's army chief warned in June 2025 that foreign deployments in Somalia threatened Ethiopian security. Bloomberg reported on 30 September that Ethiopia plans to withdraw more than 3,000 troops from Somalia as the war at home absorbs resources. Mogadishu has also reportedly reduced Ethiopia's role in its security architecture and in AUSSOM while admitting Egyptian troops into the mission.

Eritrea and Djibouti - Egypt has deepened its ties with Eritrea in recent years. The National reports that Egypt now has ground or naval facilities in Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia, and that its southern fleet, including a Mistral-class carrier, is deployed in the Red Sea near Bab al-Mandab. The outlet is based in Abu Dhabi, and the claims rest on Cairo-based sources.

Sudan - Burhan has sided with Egypt against Addis Ababa on the dam, and Egypt's alignment with the Sudanese army links the Nile dispute directly to Sudan's war.

3.6.3 What is Alleged, and What is Not

Ethiopia's army chief, Field Marshal Birhanu Jula, named Egypt, together with Sudan, among external powers he linked to Ethiopian armed groups through Eritrea. Egypt's foreign ministry spokesperson, Nader Zaki, replied that Egyptian policy rests on respect for state sovereignty and non-interference and rejects practices that undermine regional stability; a retired Egyptian general called the accusations false. Egyptian analysts quoted by Al Jazeera argued that the accusations divert attention from Ethiopia's internal crises and questioned why Cairo would intervene now. That is an argument about motive and the same objection applies to the accusation itself. Egyptian security channels, working with Eritrean intelligence and Sudanese actors, have funneled logistical and material support to insurgent groups inside Ethiopia.

Documented too is a pattern of Egyptian statements and conduct aimed at limiting Ethiopia's role. In late 2025 Egypt's foreign minister said Red Sea governance concerns only littoral states and named Ethiopia as excluded, Egypt's foreign ministry later quoted him telling Asmara that non-littoral parties have no right to engage in Red Sea arrangements, and Addis Ababa has accused Cairo of obstructing its sea-access bid. Egyptian support for armed movements against the Ethiopian state also has Cold War precedent, and meetings reported this year in Sudan, Nairobi and elsewhere are alleged to have brought

together the TPLF, Eritrean and Sudanese military figures, Ethiopian opposition groups and people linked to the Egyptian establishment. The question is whether this amounts to a recurring strategy of indirect pressure through domestic Ethiopian actors. The pattern points that way, although direct operational involvement is unproven.

3.6.4 The diplomatic Rupture of 1–2 October

On 1 October Ethiopia declared Egyptian diplomat Ahmed Moharam Ahmed Soliman persona non grata and gave him 48 hours to leave, without stating a reason, hours after it closed its embassy in Asmara and expelled ten Eritrean diplomats. On 2 October Egypt responded in kind, expelling the counsellor of Ethiopia’s embassy in Cairo. An Egyptian source quoted by state-affiliated media called Ethiopia’s move unfortunate and unjustified, and Egypt’s foreign ministry said its own step was justified. The AU Commission called on Ethiopia, Eritrea and Egypt to exercise maximum restraint and to refrain from actions or statements that could further escalate tensions.

3.6.5 The El-Alamein Declaration 4 October

On 4 October President Sisi hosted Isaias Afwerki, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and Gen. Burhan in New Alamein for a Quadrilateral Consultative Summit. Eritrea’s Ministry of Information published the declaration as an unofficial translation, Xinhua reported it, and Al Jazeera judged that it appeared to push back against several policies Ethiopia has pursued in recent years. The text names no state and contains no operational or military provision. The table sets out its operative claims and their bearing on Ethiopia’s position.

Provision	What the text says	Strategic bearing
Non-interference	Rejects interference in the internal affairs of regional states “under any pretext.”	A reciprocal norm that each signatory can direct at Ethiopian accusations of external backing; “any pretext” pre-empts security-based justifications.
Sudan	Supports unity and territorial integrity; rejects parallel entities; rejects “any support to mercenaries.”	Aimed at the RSF and its reported patrons; relevant to Addis Ababa by implication.
Somalia	Supports unity; rejects interference, “particularly recognition” of “Somaliland”; calls for AUSSOM funding.	Closes the diplomatic route opened by the January 2024 memorandum and consolidates Egypt’s presence in Somalia under AU cover.
Red Sea	Affirms freedom of navigation and makes governance of the Red Sea “the exclusive responsibility of the littoral states.”	Defines a landlocked state out of Red Sea governance and excludes non-littoral Gulf actors as well.
Nile	Invokes non-harm, “prior notification, consultation and consensus”; rejects unilateral measures harming existing water uses of the two downstream states.	Elevates non-harm and a consent requirement above equitable and reasonable utilization; treats GERD operation and the three further Blue Nile dams as unilateral measures.
Mechanism	Follow-up mechanism to meet periodically and when necessary.	Institutionalizes a four-state consultative bloc with Egypt as convener.

Read together, the clauses form one argument. They place the three questions that define Ethiopia's external strategy, access to the sea, the Nile and the Somaliland track, inside one legal vocabulary of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference, and they give authority over each to states that already hold coastline or downstream position. The littoral doctrine is the pivot. By making coastline the qualification for Red Sea governance, it converts a geographic condition into a standing disability, while the law of the sea points the other way: Part X of UNCLOS recognizes a right of access to and from the sea for landlocked states, exercised through transit arrangements with their neighbors, and the declaration is silent on it. No party contests freedom of navigation, so the live issue is whether access is a right to be arranged through transit agreements or a concession granted by littoral states.

The Nile clause follows the same pattern. Transboundary water law rests on two principles, equitable and reasonable utilization and the obligation not to cause significant harm. The declaration invokes non-harm, notification, consultation and consensus, and omits equitable utilization. A consensus requirement would give downstream states a practical veto over upstream development, which matches the position Egypt and Sudan have held on the dam's operation. The two clauses also sit uneasily together: Cairo invokes interdependence, consultation and consensus where its own geographic vulnerability is at stake and invokes exclusion by coastline where Ethiopia's is. Ethiopia's Nile position is inclusion on fairer terms and not the exclusion of downstream states, and its foreign ministry responded on 5 October that the summit changes nothing on the ground on either the Red Sea or the Nile. The Declaration cannot be reduced entirely to an anti-Ethiopian instrument, but its cumulative effect is plain.

The Somalia language contains an opening. Mohamud's offer of commercial access through Somali ports on agreed terms, read with the Somaliland clause, separates two questions that the January 2024 MoU had joined: commercial access, which Mogadishu offers on negotiated terms, and recognition and basing, which it rejects. That separation yields a negotiable track whose outcome does not depend on Cairo or Asmara, and it tests whether the four-state grouping is a closed bloc or a framework with divergent interests. Somalia's offer and Egypt's troop presence in Somalia pull in different directions.

The Declaration is not the first Red Sea grouping to exclude Ethiopia. A Saudi-led maritime coalition that includes Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Yemen, Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea and Somalia excludes both Ethiopia and the UAE. Djibouti's membership qualifies its description in the actor table as neutral. And it rests on a consensus requirement that general watercourse law does not impose. A response anchored in access rights, transit agreements and equitable utilization, carried through the AU and IGAD where the signatories hold no veto, would meet the declaration on its own terms. In Figure 4, the letter "R" marks members of that coalition and the letter "A" marks El-Alamein signatories.

3.6.6 Assessment

The El-Alamein Declaration gives a head-of-state text to positions that the encirclement thesis had inferred from Cairo's conduct. The text names no state, so its bearing on Ethiopia rests on reading its clauses against Ethiopian positions. It is the first joint text to bind the Nile, the Red Sea, Somaliland and Sudan together, it is issued at head-of-state level, and it creates a standing mechanism. The text offers no evidence of operational coordination in the northern war, so diplomatic alignment is now formal while military alignment remains alleged.

The Declaration alone does not show that Egypt is using Ethiopia's internal conflict as a lever, but read with Cairo's two-year alignment with Asmara, its military reach around Ethiopia and the pattern described above, it is consistent with a strategy in which Egypt is the overarching strategic player and Eritrea its most acute instrument. The conflict nevertheless creates potential strategic opportunities for Cairo to exert pressure on Addis Ababa, particularly through its existing disputes over the Nile and

regional security. That reading rests on inference about motive, and no public evidence links Egypt to the Tigrayan-led alliance. The report therefore treats Egyptian material support as alleged and unverified, as in the chapter conclusion.

Publicly naming Egypt carries a political benefit and a cost. It ties the insurgency to Ethiopia's largest external rival and strengthens the federal case that the war is externally backed. Ethiopia's case that the insurgency has external backers would carry more weight with the AU and Gulf mediators if the federal government put its evidence before them. The practical risks are real whatever the truth of the allegation: a direct interstate flashpoint in Somalia or the Red Sea, and the hardening of the Eritrea–Egypt–Sudan alignment, now joined by Somalia in the El-Alamein Declaration. Reporting describes that grouping as a set of states whose interests are far from identical and not as a formal alliance directed at Ethiopia

3.7 The wider Regional and International Field

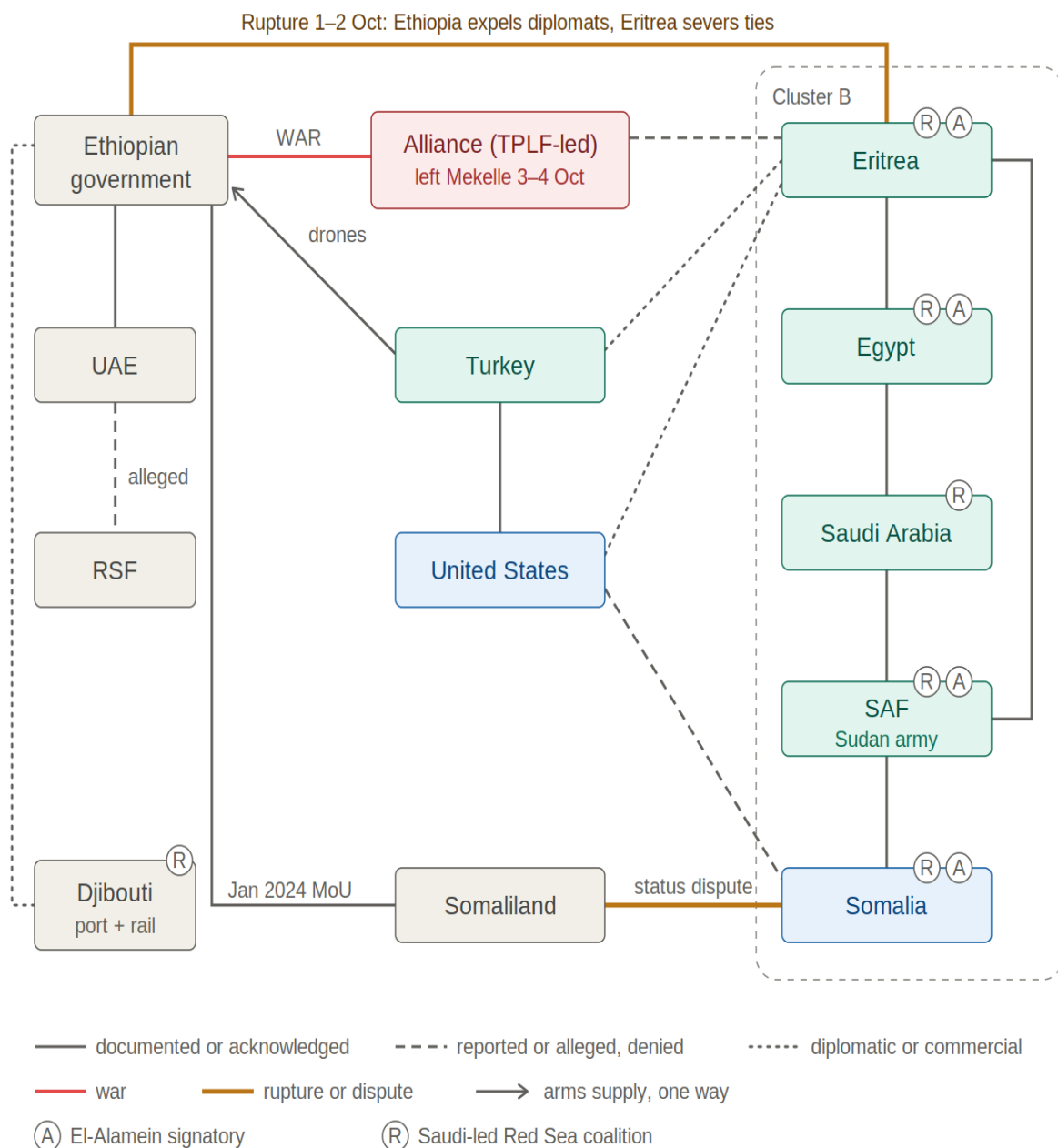


Figure 4. Two regional clusters and the contested links between them

3.7.1 External Actors Mapping

<i>Actor</i>	<i>Interests</i>	<i>Position and action</i>
<i>United Arab Emirates</i>	Ethiopia as regional partner and investment destination; RSF channel; Red Sea footprint	Closest Gulf partner of Abiy; supplied drones and an air bridge in the first war; on 30 September condemned the TPLF and its allies for attacks on federal forces and the seizure of airports.
<i>Qatar</i>	Regional stability; mediation profile	Called for an immediate end to fighting, civilian protection and respect for the Pretoria Agreement, citing Ethiopia's unity and sovereignty.
<i>Saudi Arabia</i>	Counter UAE influence; back SAF; Red Sea security	Aligned with Eritrea, Egypt and SAF; rift with the UAE since December 2025; Crisis Group urges Riyadh to restrain Asmara, Khartoum and Cairo. Leads a Red Sea maritime coalition that excludes Ethiopia and the UAE.
<i>Egypt</i>	Nile security; GERD treated as an existential issue; limiting Ethiopia's leverage in the Horn of Africa	Aligned with Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti and Sudan's army; reportedly has ground or naval facilities in four of Ethiopia's neighbors (Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia), according to The National, which relies on Cairo-based sources, with about 15,000 troops in Somalia in the AU mission (unofficial figure). Ethiopia's army chief accuses Cairo of backing the opposition and Cairo denies it. Ethiopia expelled an Egyptian diplomat on 1 October, Egypt reciprocated on 2 October, and on 4 October Egypt convened the El-Alamein summit.
<i>Turkey</i>	Mediator (Ankara Declaration); defense exports; Somalia ties	Sells drones to Ethiopia yet is described as loosely aligned with Eritrea and SAF; the most ambiguous of the middle powers
<i>United States</i>	Red Sea access against the Houthis; limiting regional spillover	Lifted sanctions on Eritrea on 18 September; allowed the 2021 Ethiopia sanctions emergency to lapse; Ambassador Ervin Massinga condemned the TPLF offensive and Washington had already sanctioned hardline TPLF leaders earlier in the year; on 18 June it announced visa restrictions on hardline TPLF members and their families, citing their threat to the Pretoria framework.
<i>EU and UK</i>	Stability, migration, Red Sea shipping	Calls for restraint and de-escalation; Western statements have tended to treat the federal government as the legitimate party
<i>Israel</i>	Recognition of Somaliland and a reported basing option there	Recognized Somaliland on 26 December 2025, the first UN member to do so. Somalia's president says Israel plans a naval base at Berbera. Israeli officials told Axios the UAE facilitated the recognition. The El-Alamein Declaration rejects recognition of "Somaliland."

<i>Djibouti</i>	Keep its port corridor open	Positioned between Addis Ababa and the Saudi-led Red Sea coalition, of which it is a member. It handles the great majority of Ethiopia's trade; the Semera road is the vulnerability.
<i>Somalia / Somaliland</i>	Somalia: sovereignty; Somaliland: recognition	The Ankara Declaration reset Addis Ababa–Mogadishu ties. On 4 October Somalia joined Egypt, Sudan and Eritrea in rejecting recognition of “Somaliland” and calling for AUSSOM funding, while its president offered Ethiopia commercial access through Somali ports on agreed terms.
<i>Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria</i>	Guarantors of the Pretoria process	Crisis Group urges them to work through the AU; Kenyatta and Obasanjo remain the central mediating figures
<i>Iran and the Houthis</i>	Red Sea leverage	Houthi gains raise the value of Eritrea to Washington and Riyadh; the Houthi campaign and the Iran war form the security backdrop to the US delisting of 18 September and to Saudi moves toward Asmara; the sources reviewed do not state that reasoning on the record.
<i>China, Russia</i>	Debt, infrastructure, arms	Not examined in this report

The Horn is dividing into two loose clusters, Ethiopia with the UAE against Eritrea with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and SAF, with Turkey ambiguous. Ethiopia is not isolated: the UAE, Israel and Turkey each have interests that converge with its pursuit of Red Sea access. Sudan alleges that the first cluster also includes the RSF, and Addis Ababa and Abu Dhabi deny it; the report treats that allegation as independently reported but contested. By 4 October part of the second cluster had a formal expression in a four-state text: Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia signed the El-Alamein Declaration. Saudi Arabia is not a signatory.

Part IV. The International Response and Why It Fell Short

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The response has been unenforceable and uncoordinated because of structure, even though it was active before 23 September and was rejected by the TPLF. The AU can convene the parties but cannot enforce a bargain. The UN accountability mandate lapsed in October 2023. Western policy is transactional, and Gulf states and Turkey are partisans. The most plausible openings are a short humanitarian pause backed by Turkey, the Gulf states and the United States, and renewed shuttle diplomacy by Obasanjo and Kenyatta.

4.1 Since 23 September

Institution	Action	Assessment
African Union	Commission chair Mahmoud Ali Youssouf urged an immediate halt to hostilities and a return to Pretoria on 23 September; on 24 September the AU asked Obasanjo to re-engage	As of 2 October no ceasefire venue, timetable or monitoring mechanism had been announced; as of 25 September no direct federal–TPLF contact had been reported. On 1 October the AU Commission urged Ethiopia, Eritrea and Egypt to exercise maximum restraint and to resolve differences through diplomatic channels.
IGAD	Called for a cessation of hostilities and dialogue	Limited leverage; the bloc is divided by the same rivalries
United Nations	Called for restraint and a return to the AU-led process; expressed alarm at drone strikes on civilians; humanitarian agencies warn of access collapse	The UN rights chief condemned the TPLF’s forced mass recruitment, including children. The UN says ENDF strikes hit five schools on 22 September.
United States	Eritrea sanctions lifted; Ethiopia sanctions emergency allowed to lapse; ambassador condemned the TPLF and threatened sanctions on its leaders	Mixed signals: the party Addis Ababa accuses of backing the TPLF received relief days before the offensive, although it had imposed visa restrictions on hardline TPLF members on 18 June
EU and UK	Called for de-escalation	Low leverage
Aid agencies	MSF reports a surge of wounded; Afar groups report some 150,000 displaced; communications and banking shut down in Tigray	The humanitarian system, already weakened by funding cuts now faces new access restrictions.

4.2 A record of structural weakness, 2020–2026

The AU holds no enforcement tools - The AU is headquartered in Addis Ababa, its Pretoria process, deliberately African-owned, excluded the UN, the EU and the US from formal roles. The agreement stopped the main fighting but contained no enforcement mechanism, and the monitoring arrangement it envisaged never became a visible source of pressure on any party.

International accountability lapsed - The framework for independent international accountability has dissolved. Established by the UN Human Rights Council in December 2021, the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE) concluded there were reasonable grounds to believe that all parties to the conflict had committed war crimes. In March 2023, the Ethiopian government opposed the commission, argued that domestic transitional justice should lead, and lobbied for early termination of its mandate. The European Union, the traditional penholder on Ethiopian resolutions at the Council, subsequently signaled it would not introduce a renewal. When the October 4, 2023, deadline passed without a sponsor, the mandate formally lapsed, with neither the United States nor members of the African Group taking action to extend it. The Pretoria agreement effectively deferred accountability to a domestic transitional justice mechanism; however, this state-led process has yielded little progress, leaving no independent, external body to document ongoing abuses.

Western leverage eroded and Gulf leverage rose - The 2021 sanctions framework against Ethiopian actors expired on 17 September 2026, and Washington now treats Eritrea as a Red Sea partner. Gulf states have become key financiers and arms suppliers. Those with the most leverage over Asmara and Addis Ababa are parties to the broader rivalry that fuses Sudan's war, the Gulf split and the Red Sea crisis.

Early warnings were not acted upon - Crisis Group's "powder keg" briefing preceded the offensive, and Tadesse Werede's April 2026 statement that the TPLF's move nullified Pretoria prompted no high-level AU intervention. The record before 23 September was not one of silence. The AU urged restraint in January and again after the airport seizures, the EU called for de-escalation in January, April, June and August, Obasanjo travelled to Mekelle and Addis Ababa, and the US ambassador warned the TPLF against an unwinnable fight while pointing to the AU channel. The TPLF chose force while those channels remained open, which is why the diplomatic record does not support treating the two sides as equally responsible.

Institutional interests - The AU, UN and EU share one core interest, which is to stop mass violence and protect institutional legitimacy. Open interstate war is their red line, the collapse of Pretoria their greatest fear and a return to the Pretoria framework their preferred outcome.

4.3 Assessment

The AU's weakness is structural: it can host a signing ceremony but holds no tools to enforce a bargain among member states and armed movements. Pretoria solved a two-sided problem, TPLF versus federal government, and left the three-sided problem of Eritrea, Amhara and the divisions within Tigray largely untouched. Western policy has become transactional, organized around Red Sea access and the Houthi threat, which diminishes attention to Ethiopia's internal conflict. The most plausible near-term openings are a convergence among Turkey, the Gulf states and the United States behind a short humanitarian

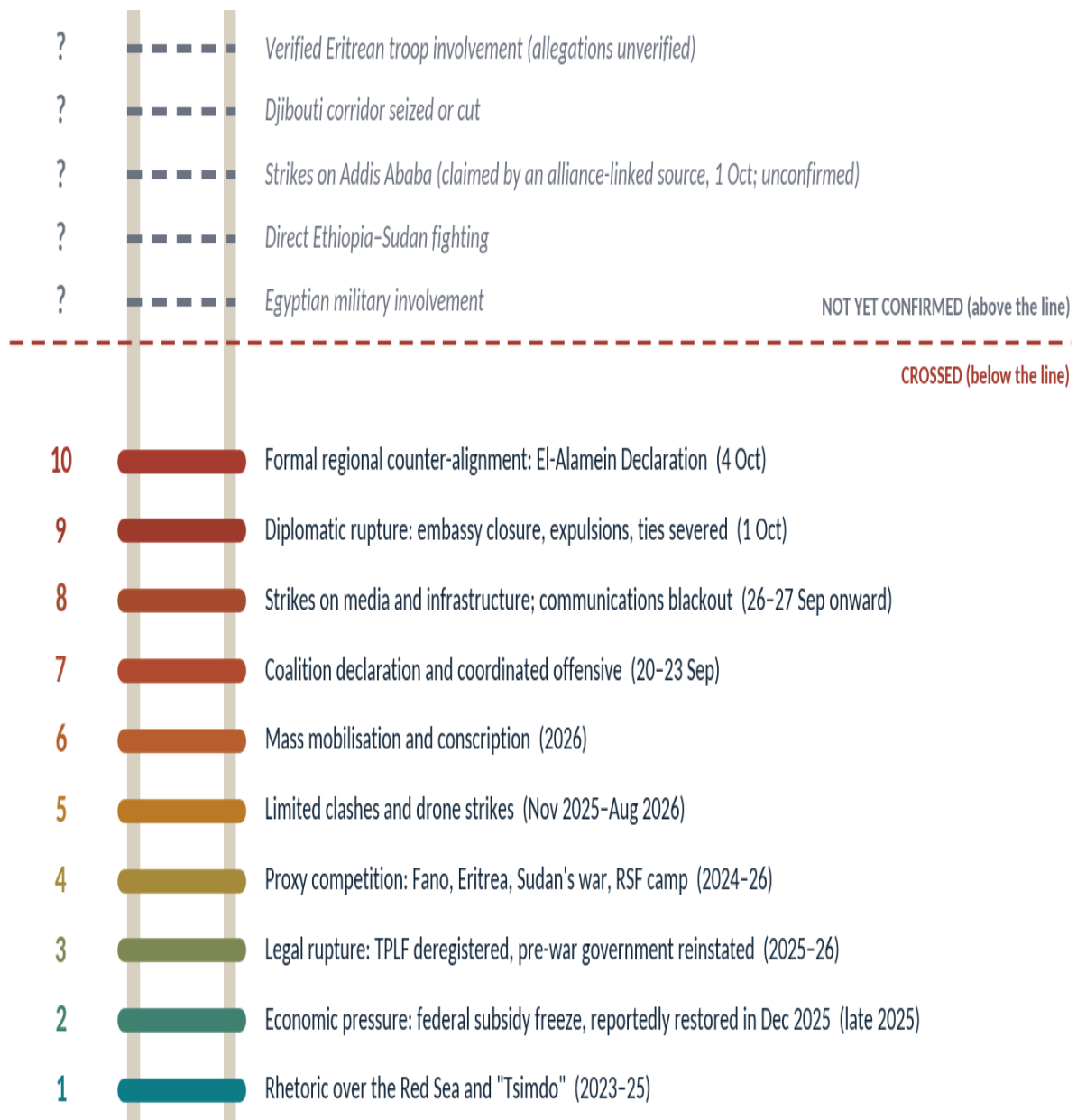
pause, and renewed shuttle diplomacy by Obasanjo and Kenyatta that offers both Addis Ababa and Mekelle a face-saving return to a revised Pretoria.

Part V. Outlook

5.1 Escalation thresholds

Ten thresholds are crossed and five remain unconfirmed as of 5 October 2026. The crossed thresholds run from Red Sea rhetoric (2023–25) through strikes on media and civilian infrastructure and communications blackouts from 26–27 September, to the diplomatic rupture of 1 October and the El-Alamein Declaration of 4 October. The Declaration joined four states in a head-of-state text with a standing follow-up mechanism and moved regional alignment from bilateral contact to institutional form, although the text carries no military provision. The eleventh is the federal ground invasion of Tigray. Federal and Tigray Peace Force fighters entered Mekelle on 3 October, and federal control of the city was confirmed on 4 October. The TPLF called its withdrawal temporary. Verified Eritrean troop involvement, a cut or seizure of the Djibouti corridor, confirmed strikes on Addis Ababa, direct Ethiopia–Sudan fighting and Egyptian military involvement remain unconfirmed. Ethiopia cited Eritrea's 'direct and indirect acts of hostility and belligerence' when it closed its embassy in Asmara on 1 October. The sources reviewed do not tie that rupture to the specific allegations of Eritrean involvement in Afar, and Ethiopia continues to call for the withdrawal of Eritrean troops from its territory.

Figure 1. The escalation ladder



5.2 Indicators to watch

- Confirmed Eritrean troop movements in Afar, satellite imagery, or an official Eritrean statement.
- The status of the Semera–Djibouti road and the Mille–Afdera corridor.
- Arrests, defections or open resistance within the TPLF; the fate of Tadesse Werede.
- Fano unity, and fighting around Gondar, Bahir Dar and Debre Markos.
- Whether federal and Tigray Peace Force units hold Mekelle and move toward Adigrat or other towns beyond it, and whether TPLF forces reconstitute north of the city.
- Whether the ENDF consolidates northern Tigray and reaches the Eritrean frontier, and whether Eritrea pulls back to its border or moves to preserve its buffer.

- Evidence on RSF facilities in Benishangul-Gumuz and any Sudan–Ethiopia border incident.
- New US designations on TPLF leaders and any further Eritrea delistings.
- An AU Peace and Security Council session, an Obasanjo shuttle, or Turkish or Saudi mediation offers.
- Telecommunications, flight, fuel and banking restrictions in Tigray.
- Humanitarian access, and displacement figures in Afar.
- Further diplomatic steps among Ethiopia, Eritrea and Egypt, such as ambassador recalls, further expulsions or the closure of missions accredited to the AU.
- The reported withdrawal of more than 3,000 Ethiopian troops from Somalia, and any change in Egypt’s military posture in Somalia, Eritrea or the Red Sea.
- The structure, leadership and timetable of any new interim administration for Tigray, and whether the regional elections reported as planned within months take place.
- Whether any party publishes evidence on the allegations of Eritrean, Sudanese or Egyptian support for the alliance, and whether Ethiopia publishes evidence on the allegations made against it, including those on the RSF.
- Federal and TPLF compliance with the Pretoria provisions in Table 2, including forced recruitment, strikes on schools and the restoration of services.
- Progress on the commercial-access track Somalia’s president offered on 3 October, and any Israeli step in Somaliland, including the Berbera naval base that Somalia’s president says Israel plans.
- Membership, meetings and statements of the Saudi-led Red Sea coalition, and any shift in Djibouti’s position.
- The status of Al Jazeera’s suspended operations in Ethiopia and of the Tigray communications blackout.
- Imagery or event data showing Eritrean staging, fortification or movement in Berahle, Dalul and the wider Assab–Bure approach, and any Eritrean statement on the Afar frontier.
- Convening and output of the El-Alamein follow-up mechanism: dates, attendance, and whether it acquires security, AUSSOM or Red Sea naval content.
- Ethiopian, AU and IGAD responses to the declaration’s Red Sea and Nile claims, including any appeal to transit-access and equitable-utilization principles.

Conclusion

Ethiopia’s war has returned because the settlement that ended the last one rested on a bargain between two parties while the conflict involved at least five. Pretoria stopped a war between Addis Ababa and the TPLF and left Eritrea outside, Amhara forces in contested lands, the displaced unreturned and justice deferred. Within three years the TPLF had split, armed Fano groups had opened an insurgency in Amhara, the prime minister’s Red Sea diplomacy had alienated Asmara, and a Sudanese war had tied the Horn’s rivalries into a single system. The fall of Mekelle also puts the buffer Asmara built in Tigray under strain, and what Eritrea does next will decide whether the northern crisis stays internal or becomes interstate.

Three features make the present phase more dangerous than the last. First, the war is being fought inside a regional contest in which each side has external patrons with their own agendas, and since 4 October that contest has a formal expression in the El-Alamein Declaration, which frames the Red Sea and the Nile as matters for littoral and downstream states. Second, the TPLF leadership is divided and under pressure, which makes negotiation harder, because commitments by one faction may not bind another. Third, the international actors that might broker a pause are divided, distracted by the Red Sea crisis, or party to the rivalries they would need to restrain.

The entry of federal forces into Mekelle on 3 and 4 October changes the military picture and leaves the political questions that produced the war where they were. The TPLF describes its withdrawal as temporary, the grievances set out in Part II are unresolved, and Tigray's next administration is the subject of reported plans for new interim administration and elections within months. Pretoria provided for an interim regional administration, and a new one restores that provision after the TPLF removed the last. A settlement without broad Tigrayan participation would risk leaving the conditions for another round in place.

The practical priorities are modest but urgent: a humanitarian pause and unhindered access; an end to aerial bombardment of towns and civilian infrastructure and an end to forced recruitment; a credible channel between the AU mediators and both Addis Ababa and the TPLF leadership; use of the commercial-access track Somalia has offered; and quiet but firm pressure on Asmara, Cairo, and Khartoum to refrain from escalation.

Table. Priorities for Policymakers

Audience	Implication drawn from the report
AU and the Pretoria guarantors	Anchor talks in Obasanjo and the guarantors, open a channel to both Addis Ababa and Mekelle, revive the AU monitoring role, and renew an implementation plan on Welkait-Tsegede, return of the displaced, disarmament and withdrawal of foreign forces. Identify which faction can deliver each ceasefire term.
Gulf states and Turkey	Converge behind a short humanitarian pause. The UAE and Qatar have stated positions, Turkey has mediated through the Ankara Declaration, and Riyadh is urged to restrain Asmara, Khartoum and Cairo.
Humanitarian actors	Plan for access collapse in Tigray (communications and banking cut) and displacement in Afar, against funding cuts.
TPLF leadership	Halt offensive operations in Afar and Amhara, stop forced recruitment and any recruitment of children, account for the commanders reported detained on 24 September, and use the AU channel to set out its terms for a return to Pretoria.
Federal government	Stop strikes on towns and civilian infrastructure, restore communications and banking in Tigray, admit humanitarian and media access, and state publicly the limited objectives of any operation on the Afar frontier. Put the evidence for its accusations against Eritrea, Sudan and Egypt before the AU mediators.
Eritrea, Egypt, Sudan, and Somalia	Eritrea, Egypt, Sudan and Somalia": Refrain from escalation and material involvement; verified Eritrean troops will move the war toward interstate conflict. Apply the declaration's own commitments to non-interference and peaceful solutions to the Ethiopian conflict, use the follow-up mechanism as a de-escalation channel, and keep a channel to Addis Ababa open through the AU.
Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti	Pursue the commercial-access track Somalia's president offered on 3 October on agreed terms and keep the Djibouti corridor open. These are the most negotiable parts of the sea-access question.

Annex Glossary and Naming Conventions

Term	Meaning and convention used
Tsimdo	Tigrinya word for “engagement”. Used as shorthand for a hostile TPLF–Eritrea axis; its proponents use it for reconciliation between two peoples. The report places it in quotation marks and adopts neither meaning.
Ugugumo	The Afar movement, rendered in English as the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front or the Afar National Unity Revolutionary Front.
Tigray Peace Force / Hara Meret	Armed Tigrayan formation of former TDF fighters and officers that split from the TDF in 2025 and is allegedly federally backed. The report uses “Tigray Peace Force”; “Hara Meret” is the name used for the same formation in some sources.
AFNM	Amhara Fano National Movement, formed in January 2026 by Fano factions.
TDF	Tigray Defense Forces, the Tigrayan armed force aligned with the TPLF leadership.
Army 70	Force of Tigrayans stranded in eastern Sudan during the first war, who have fought alongside SAF.
Alliance for Survival	Ethiopian Peoples’ Forces Alliance for Survival, announced on 20 September 2026 by seven movements.
Somaliland	Self-declared republic in northern Somalia. Israel recognised it on 26 December 2025; Somalia rejects recognition. The report uses the name without taking a position on its status.
Pretoria Agreement	Cessation of Hostilities Agreement signed on 2 November 2022 under AU auspices. The Nairobi implementation declaration of 12 November 2022 supplemented it on military terms.
Saudi-led Red Sea coalition	Maritime grouping reported to include Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Yemen, Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea and Somalia. Ethiopia and the UAE are excluded.
Welkait, Tselemti, Raya	Contested territories. The TPLF and Fano both claim Western Tigray, Welkait and Tselemti. Pretoria deferred their status.
Assab	Eritrean Red Sea port. Ethiopian talk of recovering Red Sea access is the central Eritrean fear. The UAE had a base there in 2015–19.
SAF, RSF	Sudanese Armed Forces (Burhan) and Rapid Support Forces (Hemedti).
El-Alamein Declaration	Joint declaration issued on 4 October 2026 after a quadrilateral summit in New Alamein, Egypt, by Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia. Eritrea’s Ministry of Information published it as an unofficial translation.
Littoral states	States with a coastline on the Red Sea. The declaration assigns Red Sea governance exclusively to them, which excludes landlocked Ethiopia.
Berahle, Dalul	Districts of Ethiopia’s Afar region near the Eritrean frontier, named in reporting on Eritrean force movements. Spellings vary (Berhale, Dallol).
GERD	Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, inaugurated in September 2025.
OLA, OLF, ONLF	Oromo Liberation Army; Oromo Liberation Front, from which the OLA split; ONLF, the Somali-region movement. Only an overseas faction of the ONLF signed the alliance.
BPLM, GPDM	Benishangul People’s Liberation Movement (BPLM); GPDM, the Gumuz People’s Democratic Movement. Both were named as signatories; ACLED reports that the GPDM has denied joining.

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