

“Humanitarian Hawks” Demand War on Ethiopia, US National Guard Deploys to the Horn

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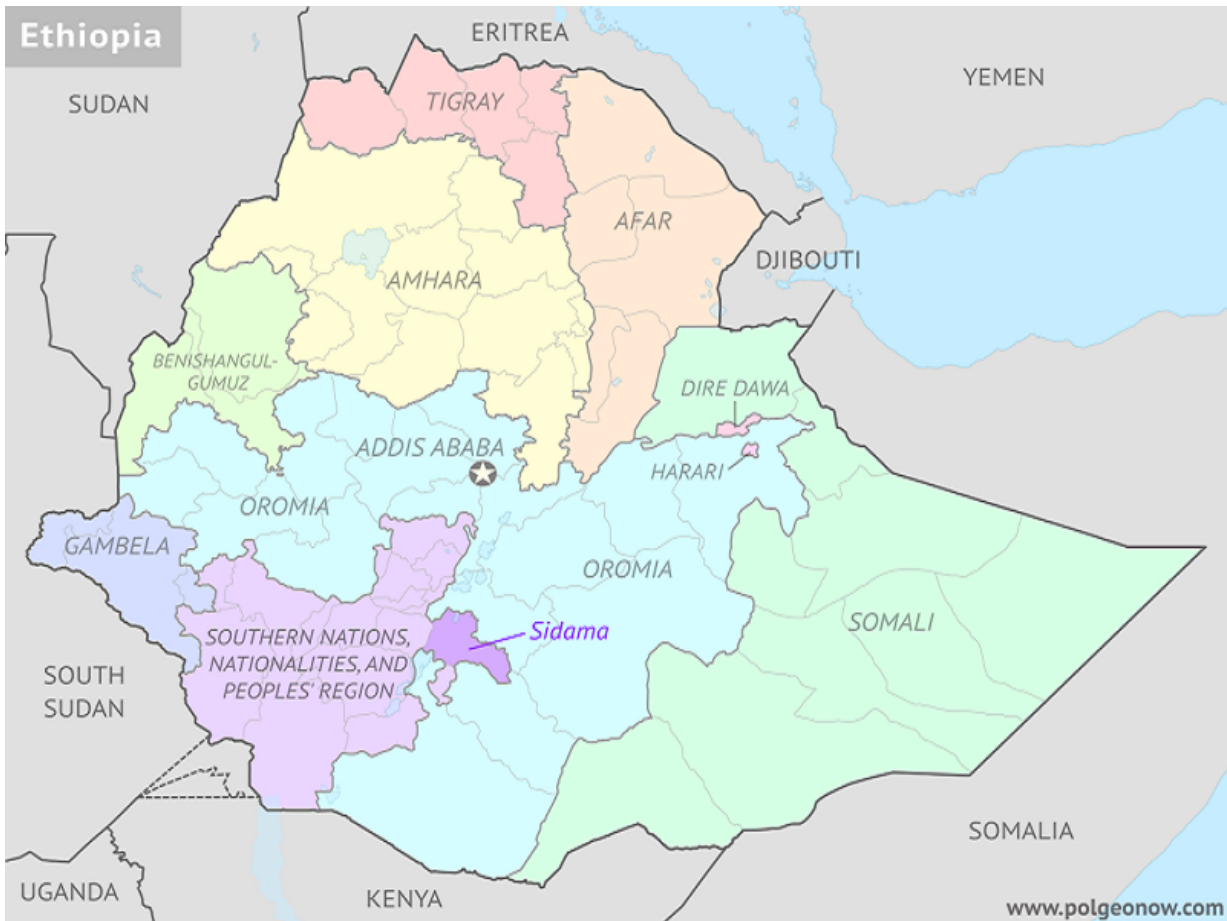
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News of the deployment of National Guard troops to an unspecified location in the Horn of Africa is an indication that US interference in the region will continue.

The dominant corporate and state media have [reported](#) for months that Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, will soon fall to the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), a treasonous splinter of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) that started a civil war by attacking an Ethiopian federal army base on November 3, 2020. However, the dominant press have of late been unable to deny that the ENDF has retaken cities, towns, and territory in the Amhara and Afar Regional States, both of which border the Tigray Regional State.

The TPLF is a longstanding ally of the US, which supported its brutal 27-year, minority rule in exchange for its army’s service to the US agenda on the African continent. Its proponents have stridently called for US military action to stop what they call genocide in Tigray, even though UN and Ethiopian Human Rights Commission investigators concluded that there is no genocide taking place.



I spoke with Ann Fitz-Gerald, Director of the [Balsillie School of International Relations](#) at the University of Waterloo in Ontario. She has extensive experience in Ethiopia.

AG: Ann Fitz-Gerald, news came out this week that a thousand National Guardsmen from Virginia and Kentucky are [deploying](#) to Ft. Bliss, Texas now to train for deployment to the Horn of Africa at the turn of the year.

Nearly half the troops in Afghanistan and Iraq were National Guardsmen, so that's nothing new. But what do you think of this escalation of boots on the ground? Especially to a region as increasingly volatile as the Horn?

AF: It's not totally clear what these troops have been deployed for. A press release stated that it was to support safety and stability in the region. The statement said the objective is to provide security for the forward operating bases maintained by the Department of Defense, to build partnerships with host nations, and to improve safety and stability in the region.

Other sources have disclosed that it is the [largest single unit Virginia National Guard mobilization since WWII](#). So it's definitely gained a lot of interest.

The National Guard is a unique element of the military, with a direct line of command both to the state governor and the federal authorities. But they respond to domestic emergencies and overseas combat missions, counter drug efforts, reconstruction missions, and more. Sometimes the National Guards, which are often called "paramilitary forces" in other countries, are more effective than the regular military units in supporting things like

domestic emergencies such as crowd control, disaster management, and community defense and resilience.

In this case, the deployment may be for contingency purposes, augmentation purposes. Should the military contingency force, known as CJTF—the Horn of Africa Combined Joint Task Forces— be deployed, maybe the National Guard troops would provide security to this and other forward operating bases and/or be used for other augmentation purposes, not only in the case where the main force would become deployed, but also for the purposes of drawing on wider competencies of the Guards, which are more oriented to domestic crises like civil unrest and natural disasters.

One may argue that it's quite surprising with troops returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan, and the drawdowns in those theaters of operations, that the government would draw on the National Guard to deploy overseas. On the other hand, the National Guard could arguably cover a wider range of missions. We are dealing these days with wider security threats. So maybe the US government is looking for that wider flexibility and agility in support of its ongoing operations on the continent.

AG: It seemed for a moment that you might be saying the National Guard does especially nice things. But this is alarming, to say the least, to Ethiopians who've expected the US to start drone bombing, or invade in some other way, for the past year.

AF: That's what the risk always is when the directives come across as very general or slightly unclear, and when there is a crisis in the region as well. It is easy to jump to conclusions and make assumptions.

And I am sure that constituencies in the US might also be alarmed by the costs of losing domestic support in states like Virginia to overseas missions. They might ask whether that's the best use of the National Guard while we're still in the COVID crisis and facing climate calamities like wildfires, hurricanes, and rising sea levels.

Others may assume that the US is scaling up its military operations in the Horn of Africa so as to take military action in Ethiopia, but I would encourage people not to jump to conclusions. This may be part of a wider vision that the US government has for its military footprint in Africa, not just in the Horn.

The US recently announced, back in March 2021, a new direction for national security that was intricately tied to the US's economic interests at home and overseas. So it may be part and parcel of a wider mission, all of which would involve a more deeply embedded footprint in the Horn of Africa.

AG: I can't say I find that reassuring.

AF: Well, it may also relate to the US Embassy in Addis Ababa encouraging US nationals to get out of the country as soon as they can and suggesting that they might need help.

In addition to that, there are more regional issues such as the recent coup in Sudan. The US military still has a dominant presence in the Sudanese government. We also see election uncertainty and unrest in Somalia.

AG: Do you think there's any good reason for the US military to be in Africa and/or any benefit for the African people?

AF: Well, we've been talking for a long time now about African solutions to African challenges and a wider role to be taken on the by the African Union. And not just the African Union, but the continent's regional economic mechanisms and regional economic communities.

The US Department of Defense was in the past focused on the potential for mass migration to Europe and North America. Another concern is keeping shipping routes and waterways protected and open.

AG: Today California 30th District Congressman Brad Sherman suggested blocking trade going in and out of Ethiopia and Eritrea through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Oman. With a Chinese base as well as a US base in Djibouti, that could cause a greater logjam than that cargo ship that got stuck in the Suez Canal earlier this year.

AF: I agree that doesn't sound wise. Are Americans really served by a wider US military footprint than the one we have already seen on the African continent? During a time when the number of African standby forces across the continent has increased? When there have been efforts to develop a collaborative arrangement between the UN and the African Union (AU) to support African peacekeeping missions? One would think this US presence should now be scaled down to let Africans solve their own problems.

AG: Lots of people on the African continent, and those who are critical of US and Western policy in Africa, think that elite Western interests are just there to dominate, exploit, and indebt them, and steal their natural resources. Do you think they are honestly there for anything else?

AF: They are there to protect US foreign policy interests and US national security interests. It should also be noted that earlier on this year, the US announced new plans for their national security strategy to be indistinguishable from their plans for a new economic strategy.

That economic strategy has implications for building back better at home in the US vis a vis its overseas economic interests. So it seems that there is a renewed interest that the US has taken in mineral resources across the African continent and the [Arabian/Nubian Shield](#). There is an interest in having access to those natural resources: lithium, niobium, and other minerals that are key to pivoting to a cleaner, greener economy, which is the main thrust of the US economic plans. That would require access to these minerals and resources, but also stability to support that access.

AG: But the US sows chaos wherever it goes, as it has in Libya, Syria, and Somalia, just to name those nations nearest Ethiopia.

AF: Well, its logical goals should be stability, peace, and security on the African continent. In the longer term, stability should in fact benefit the pursuit of American economic interests across the continent.

AG: I can't help laughing. I'm sure you've noticed that I talk more colloquially, like a journalist, while you talk like an academic. We are both who we are.

AF: Yes we are. As an academic I'm required to discuss things in a certain way, but we agree about a lot and have enough in common to talk.

AG: OK, the TPLF has been claiming that they are winning the war in Ethiopia, and the western press has been chanting day after day that the TPLF is close to seizing Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. Every day there are reports in the US and European capitals that they are withdrawing embassy personnel and that NGO staff and foreign citizens are fleeing at the behest of their governments.

Today, however, these outlets, even the dominant corporate outlets, are reporting that the Ethiopian National Defense Force is recapturing northern towns and districts. What do you think is going to happen militarily?

AF: We've seen a lot of different media reports on issues concerning the trajectory of the conflict, and developments on the battlefield. And of course CNN published a story with photos taken way back in May in the Tigray Regional State, but said that they were TPLF rebel forces on the outskirts of Addis, and that the TPLF had the city encircled.

On the contrary, we've now learned from local Ethiopian media that the town of Lalibela has been retaken, as have a number of other northern districts in the North Wollo Regional State, the region just south of the Tigray Region. North Wollo is where there are communities all along the border with Tigray.

Lalibella is an historic and holy city, famous for its churches carved out of rock in the 12th and 13th centuries. It's a UNESCO world heritage site, and people both inside and outside Ethiopia were alarmed when the TPLF seized it.

The national defense forces have also retaken cities including Gashena, where five strategic routes come together, including the road into Tigray Region and onward onto Tigray's capital, Me'kele. We have also been informed by national and local media sources that the TPLF has suffered some very heavy losses at the front lines of these battle areas.

I understand that the TPLF no longer have a presence at all in the Afar Region.

Forced recruitment by the TPLF rebels, however, has continued across different segments of the Tigray Regional State population, and as a result, many people who lack experience in soldiering are coming to the front lines. This has resulted in large, tragic losses.

Local Ethiopian news is also reporting that there've been significant losses to the TPLF leadership. There was an announcement last week citing that 12 senior leaders had been killed. The Ethiopian army's air strikes are also continuing and they have targeted the TPLF supply lines that were running between Mek'ele and other areas, and in the border region with Amhara Regional State.

We are seeing a likely TPLF defeat in the Amhara region, but the question is, now that Afar has been cleared of conflict, why do remaining TPLA fighters from Amhara keep increasing in numbers? What happens next? I expect a TPLF defeat, after which democracy and peace should be declared as the pillars of the post-conflict pathway.

Priority has to be given to an interim administration set up in the Tigray Region which makes space for all political groupings, all opposition groups as well—plural politics. And in all the conflict-affected regions, rebuilding the infrastructure must take priority.

The Ministry of Peace reported back in August that some critical infrastructure in Tigray had been destroyed repeatedly by TPLF fighters and had been reconstructed and rebuilt several

times. But these services extend to banking as well. All these critical services need to be supported. And social programs. Support to these sorts of programs will win the support of the people. It is the confidence of these conflict -affected communities that the government really needs to win back.

Social programs are important for community healing and community-based and political-based dialogue. There are issues concerning accountability and rule of law, which very much depends on which leaders remain in position at the top of the TPLF organization.

What leaders were responsible for strategic command and control of the fighting, and specifically the attack on the northern manned outposts that launched this war in the first place? I would say, in the spirit of prioritizing peace and democracy, that in parallel with holding this very small group of leaders to account, the government should consider granting a blanket amnesty to all others. It would be a magnanimous move on the government's part and it would help support the much needed healing and space for dialogue.

AG: The US has seemed determined to see the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed fall. The constant calls of genocide in Tigray are like those that usually precede US bombing campaigns, as they did in Libya and Syria. There was a piece [in *The Guardian*](#) saying that genocide is imminent and we must act. One of its authors was a former head of the United Nations Development Program, whom WHO Chief [Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus—a former TPLF minister—had appointed](#) to co-chair the WHO's Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response.

Do you see any retreat from all this crusading and the very real possibility that the US might attack Ethiopia, claiming it has to “stop genocide?”

AF: I've seen some concerning things that have come out as statements by US policy makers, particularly by the State Department. That has generated anti-U.S. sentiment back in Ethiopia and also across the Ethiopian diaspora community. There's been constant criticism of the Ethiopian government, and punitive sanctions imposed on Ethiopia and its ally Eritrea, but none on the TPLF. This has emboldened the TPLF and given it no incentive to stand down. So the TPLF incursions outside Tigray have continued, the insurgency has continued, and the violence and destruction has continued.

On the genocide issue, I read some online US national news about this, which referred to a decision to halt any official decision made on a genocide designation. The claim of genocide has been debunked by a recent [report](#) written by investigators from the UN and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, but despite this report, many media outlets, most of all CNN and its foreign correspondent Nima Elbagir, have continued to cry genocide. Elbagir, in her recent moderation of a panel hosted at Yale University—which featured 2 senators from the human rights caucus—seemed to be pushing the US to disregard the UN report and adopt a domestic designation of genocide.

AG: You were disinvited from that panel at Yale, weren't you? I read this report, [Yale hosts Ethiopia conference amid social media controversy, disinvites speaker](#). It quotes you saying, “I had no objection to being asked to stand down from the event. I understand that others did complain on the basis that Ethiopian voices were not represented at the event.”

AF: There wasn't a single Ethiopian voice and in the end, the panel was not only all white

but also all male. CNN's Nima Elbagir, the only woman and the only person of color, moderated.

AG: So they didn't even much bother with the optics of ten white men debating the fate of a Black African nation.

AF: No, they didn't.

AG: The US has also demanded "negotiations without preconditions" for almost a year, implying that the TPLF and the federal government are equals who should surrender everything, then just sit down and talk to each other. What do you think about that?

AF: The issue of negotiations, much less negotiations without preconditions, is a non-starter with Ethiopians. You can flip this on its head and say the Biden administration wouldn't go to the negotiation table with the insurrectionists who stormed Capitol Hill after Trump lost the last US presidential election. Ethiopia should not be treated with different standards.

The Ethiopian people need this war to end. The world needs this war to end. The unnecessary losses, the destruction to livelihoods, all of this needs to stop. And a more peaceful pathway involving rebuilding, needs to start. This is not going to be an easy task, but it is one that the country must prioritize, one that should be supported and cannot be rushed. Healing, development, forgiveness, and social reconstruction will take many years. That's what we should be thinking about, as western partner countries at the moment. Support for peace.

AG: Despite its protestations about negotiations, the US government has acted as though peace in the region is the last thing they're interested in. Just as peace is the last thing they were interested in when they went to war with Libya and Syria. So why would you expect anything different?

AF: That's the disappointing side of things about US policy on Ethiopia and the wider Horn of Africa region. While the US takes a very short term view of its own interests, enormous diplomatic and cooperative opportunities are foregone. Arguments about the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which US ally Egypt does not want to see completed, has taken away from discussions on regional economic cooperation that could have gone on in the meantime. The US needs to take a longer view of its own interests and those of the region.

AG: As a journalist, I feel it's my job to describe what is as well as I can, and I can't help being cynical, but I know that, as a professor at the [Balsillie School of International Affairs](#), you need to propose a better way forward, as you're doing.

AF: Trying to.

AG: This week, we've seen [leaked footage](#) of a meeting in which former and current western diplomats met with a senior TPLF member and spokesperson, despite US claims to neutrality. What do you think of this video?

AF: The video became viral and infamous quite quickly. It was a big leak. My own concerns about the video were the way in which a so-called civil society organization platformed a known leader of a nationally declared terrorist group, the TPLF.

AG: Hold on, you need to explain what you mean by "nationally declared terrorist group."

AL: There was a vote in the Ethiopian parliament which designated the TPLF as a terrorist group following its attack on the Northern Command post on the 3rd and 4th of November 2020. To give a platform to Berhane Gebre-Christos, a leader and spokesperson of that group—for a civil society organization to do that—is not good practice. No one should provide platforms for groups that commit high crimes.

Berhane Gebre-Christos said he wanted to create a “transitional government,” meaning to topple the legitimately elected government of Ethiopia, and the Western diplomats and former diplomats there agreed with him.

It’s totally inappropriate for any current or previously serving diplomat to get mixed up with a group plotting a coup.

My other concern is that the website of this NGO in question claimed that the organization had been receiving funds from the USAID and the NED. And then, very quickly, after the video was released, we saw many so-called board members and founding members speaking out, claiming that they had in fact not been playing the role suggested by the video and the organization’s website.

AG: What organization?

AF: The civil society group that was hosting the meeting. It’s called Peace and Development Center Ethiopia, and its website is pdcethiopia.org. They hosted the meeting that the leaked video had covered.

AG: Is there anything you’d like to say about the role of the USAID and NED?

AF: I don’t know the extent of their projects that USAID and NED are funding. It just stated on the website that the organization did receive funds from both USAID and NED.

AG: The US government’s aggressive policy is so short sighted that it’s obviously pushing Ethiopia into collaboration with China, which is exactly what they’re trying to stop. It’s incredibly stupid. One might imagine that USAID Administer Samantha Power and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken are agents of the Chinese government.

AF: I agree that it’s very unwise and short-sighted. And it is the opposite of the U.S.’s stated and perceived goals.

AG: Is there anything else you’d like to say?

AF: I hope to see peace take root in Ethiopia and across the wider Horn of Africa region very soon. I hope we’ll be having interviews of a very different sort in the near future.

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