

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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KILLING OF BOKO HARAM LEADER ABUBAKAR SHEKAU BOOSTS ISLAMIC STATE IN NIGERIA

Jacob Zenn

On May 21, reports emerged from Nigeria, and especially from Boko Haram insider journalist Ahmed Salkida's publication *HumAngle*, that longtime Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau was dead ([HumAngle.ng](https://www.humangle.ng), May 22). Shekau earned a reputation since assuming Boko Haram leadership in 2010 for being declared deceased by Nigeria's army only to resurface in videos, alive, taunting the military ([Militant Leadership Monitor](https://www.militantleadershipmonitor.com), May 3, 2014). This time is different, however, because the army is not claiming to be responsible for killing Shekau. Rather, Shekau's rivals in Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) launched an offensive into Shekau's Sambisa, Borno state base. ISWAP killed some of Shekau's guards, and held some sort of dialogue with the Boko Haram leader about surrendering and pledging loyalty to Islamic State (IS). However, Shekau apparently detonated his suicide vest, killing himself and at least one other ISWAP commander ([HumAngle.ng](https://www.humangle.ng), May 20).

Although ISWAP is yet to comment on Shekau's death or provide evidence of it, the death does seem to be confirmed. Several days before Shekau's death, for example, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the ISWAP leader who de-throned Shekau from leadership in August 2016 and was himself replaced in March 2019, released an audio announcing that IS reinstated him to be the "caretaker" leader of ISWAP ([Ra'id Media Agency](https://www.ra'idmediaagency.com), May 16). Al-Barnawi's father, Muhammed Yusuf, had led Boko Haram until his death in 2009 at the hands of Nigerian security forces and his then deputy, Shekau, assumed leadership ([Daily Trust](https://www.dailytrust.com), July 4, 2010). However, over the next several years Shekau became excessively ruthless toward Muslim civilians and sub-commanders. As a result, al-Barnawi appealed successfully to IS for Shekau's removal in August 2016. The reinstatement of al-Barnawi to ISWAP leadership just before the offensive against Shekau indicates that al-Barnawi's promotion and Shekau's demise were related and both IS and ISWAP sought to put an end to the Boko Haram leader, whose brutalities and disrespect of IS' orders made him anathema to the organization and its province in the area ([Al-Naba](https://www.alnaba.com), August 2, 2016).

Shekau, for his part, gave a final sermon on the day before his death that has been leaked publicly ([Twitter.-com/@HumAngle](https://twitter.com/HumAngle), May 22). He indicated that many of his fighters had been killed and the group was facing calamities. Shekau said he would never be loyal to anybody. His tone also suggested he knew was near the end. However, the dramatic fashion in which he reportedly ended his life evidently took ISWAP by surprise and, for the first time in several years, Nigeria will enter a post-Shekau era. This is not necessarily auspicious from a counter-insurgency perspective because ISWAP is, after all, a more effective insurgent force in terms of tactics and engaging the population than Shekau's faction.

Moreover, not only ISWAP, but also IS itself, will be bolstered with Shekau out of the picture. They considered him a "renegade" for not following IS orders and "dividing the mujahidin" ([Telegram](https://t.me/Telegram), February 14, 2020). In sum, Nigerians have a reason to celebrate the demise of Shekau, who had brutalized so many civilians, but little reason to expect a waning of the insurgency overall as a result of his death. In addition, Shekau may have a successor, whose identity is uncertain, but who has appeared in a number of Shekau faction videos delivering sermons, including the claim of the Zabarmari massacre earlier this year in which dozens of Borno farmers were decapitated. "Shekauism" may, therefore, live on ([Telegram](https://t.me/Telegram), December 1, 2020).

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

ETHNIC MILITIAS RISE UP TO OPPOSE MYANMAR JUNTA

Jacob Zenn

After the Myanmar military launched a coup in February to unseat the country's democratically elected government, Myanmar has fallen into increasing disorder. New militias and insurgent movements are emerging throughout states on the country's periphery where ethnic minorities predominate. Aung San Suu Kyi, who was arrested during the coup, will "soon appear for trial," according to the Myanmar junta leader's statement on a Chinese television interview ([Twitter.com/@TostevinM](https://twitter.com/TostevinM), May 22). The lack of any political reconciliation with her or handing power back over to any civilian authorities indicates reconciliation is unlikely anytime soon.

Meanwhile, signs are emerging that Myanmar's military, known as the Tatmadaw, could be seeing dissent within its ranks. Army Major Hein Thaw Oo defected from the army and has begun training several dozen other defectors to fight the junta. According to Hein Thaw Oo, it was not necessarily the coup itself, but the junta's killing of civilian protesters in the aftermath of the coup that caused his fighters and him to defect ([Myanmar Now](https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/2021-05-09), May 9).

Ethnic militias are also rising up to oppose the junta. The Chinland Defense Force, located in Chin State bordering Bangladesh, killed six junta soldiers, including an army captain, in May ([Irrawaddy.com](https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/2021-05-21), May 21). On the other side of the country civilians in Kayah State, in the east bordering Thailand, are being arrested by junta soldiers on suspicion of joining the Karenni Army and other civilian militias to oppose the junta ([Irrawaddy.com](https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/2021-05-21), May 21). Even in the capital, Yangon, a junta official was shot dead in the street after five other officials had been assassinated in other cities throughout the country ([Irrawaddy.com](https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/2021-05-18), May 18). Only days after the Yangon assassination, bombs were detonated in Yangon's business district, killing two police officers ([Irrawaddy.com](https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/2021-05-21), May 21).

In the far south of Myanmar, civilians have also engaged in peaceful methods of protest to oppose the junta. They have, for example, held mass motorcycle rallies as a means of protest in the southernmost Thanintharyi

Division ([Twitter.com/@Khaing_Hsuu](https://twitter.com/@Khaing_Hsuu), May 23). In the far north of the country, in Saigaing, civilians have held Buddhist prayers to “Save Myanmar” and pray for the lives of protesters ([@sthk_u](https://twitter.com/@sthk_u), May 23). Thus, at the same time that ethnic militias are newly rising up or continuing longstanding battles against Myanmar’s military and other anti-junta militants are engaging in ‘lone-attacker’ operations against the military, peaceful mass action is still being used to demonstrate opposition to the junta.

Little organizational command and control exist between the various elements opposing the military. Moreover, any potential unifying figure, like Aung San Suu Kyi, is unable to rally the opposition because she is in junta custody. Nevertheless, growing evidence from around the country indicates that the junta is losing control and the country risks spiraling into longer term instability. With the junta unwilling to compromise and powerful countries like China and Russia supporting the junta and providing it arms, it is also unlikely any ASEAN or Western pressure will lead to the military stepping down (Irrawaddy.com, May 21). More violence and mass civilian actions against the junta, therefore, appear inevitable.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

Former Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed Narrowly Avoids Assassination: A Political Conspiracy or Islamic State Plot?

Animesh Roul

On May 6, Maldives’ Speaker of Parliament and former President Mohamed Nasheed was seriously injured in an assassination attempt outside his home in the capital, Male. The improvised explosive device (IED) blast also wounded members of his security team and bystanders, including a foreign national. Although jihadists elements remain the primary suspect for the attempt on Nasheed’s life, no group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

Maldivian security agencies have not made any statements on the matter, but indicated that the attack was possibly the work of Islamist extremists ([Hindustan Times](https://www.hindustan-times.com), May 9). Three suspects identified were Mujaaz Ahmed, Thahumeen Ahmed, and Ahmed Adhumam from the Male and Hulhumale areas. They were arrested during initial security operations based on closed circuit television footage from the blast site and were taken into custody. They have since denied involvement in the attack on Nasheed ([One Online](https://www.oneonline.com), May 9). On May 19, another suspect, Ahmed Fathih, was arrested from Dharavandhoo in connection with the explosion. According to police, he parked the IED-laden vehicle that targeted Nasheed, and forensic evidence collected from the site suggested his involvement in the blast. ([Times of Addu](https://www.timesofaddu.com), May 20).

The Commissioner of Police, Mohamed Hameed, has indicated that more people may be behind the assassination conspiracy ([One Online](https://www.oneonline.com), May 9; [The Press](https://www.thepress.com), May 9). In addition, on May 15, a special counter-terrorism operation was conducted in Addu, where seven individuals linked with Islamic State (IS) were arrested ([Raajje](https://www.raajje.com), May 15). Another ideologue, Abdullah Ali Manik, from Himandhoo was arrested on May 19. Manik, who has been engaged in spreading jihadist ideology in the

country for several years, is accused of planning a major terrorist attack ([Sun](#), May 19). All of these arrests and operations may have a direct link to the investigations of the May 6 assassination, given their temporal proximity. However, the Maldives Police Service has been tight-lipped about the countrywide crackdown on Islamist networks.

An Islamist Assassination Plot?

As a vocal critic of rising extremism in the Maldives, an assassination attempt on Nasheed's life is not entirely surprising. He has raised concerns about youth radicalization, gang violence, and the criminal-extremist nexus in the Maldives. Radical gang members with political patronage have carried out several acts of targeted violence in the past decade ([Terrorism Monitor](#), November 21, 2014). In October 2013, the Defense Ministry and National Security Intelligence, for example, received a complaint of criminal conspiracy to assassinate Nasheed, who was then the president and leader of the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP). The complaint suggested two pro-al-Qaeda extremists in Male were tasked to assassinate Nasheed ([Minivan News Archive](#) October 26, 2013). He even received death threats on his personal mobile phone while visiting the United Kingdom in October 2014. The threatening messages came after attacks on the headquarters of the MDP and on his home in Male ([Minivan News Archive](#), October 5, 2014).

In the Maldives, jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda and IS, have garnered support through their media campaigns in the past several years. In early September 2019, the Presidential Commission on Investigation of Murders and Enforced Disappearances under Husnu al-Suood, for example, found that both groups were active in the Maldives and had been recruiting fighters for the Syria and Afghanistan conflicts. The Commission's interim report also identified leaders and recruiters of the IS and al-Qaeda factions in the country. Irrespective of their ideological orientations, both groups' supporters attended the al-Furqan and al-Noor mosques in Male ([Maldives Independent](#), September 01, 2019).

IS claimed its first attack in the Maldives when local supporters used incendiary weapons to set fire to government-owned boats, including a sea ambulance and po-

lice patrolling vessel in Mahibadhoo harbour in Alifu Dhaalu Atoll in mid-April 2020 ([One Online](#), April 15, 2020). An IS statement claimed that the boats belonged to the "apostate government of the Maldives and its loyalists." Before these arson attacks, in early February 2020, an IS supporter's stabbing spree injured three foreign nationals. Although IS did not claim the stabbing attacks, it praised the incident in the pro-IS magazine *Sawt al-Hind* (Voice of India). IS exclaimed "oh Lions of Khilafah in the Maldives" and urged Muslims of neighboring countries to follow the example of the stabbings ([Sawt al-Hind](#), No. 3, April 2020). Now in its sixteenth issue, *Sawt-al-Hind* has a regular column under a dedicated section called "From the Brothers in the Maldives" that incites IS supporters to stage attacks in the Maldives ([Sawt al Hind](#), May 16, 2021).

Vendetta Politics in the Maldives

Political vendettas leading to assassination attempts on rivals is not new in the Maldives. The former vice president, Ahmed Adheeb, for example, was arrested for a September 28, 2015 explosion on the presidential yacht, attempting to kill then-President Abdulla Yameen. Adheeb, too was accused of a bombing conspiracy during a historic anti-government protest on May 1, 2015 ([Maldives Independent](#), November 1, 2015; [Maldives Independent](#) February 25, 2016).

While the investigation into the May 6 assassination attempt on Nasheed continues, a larger political conspiracy to eliminate Nasheed, who was the first democratically elected President and the most powerful politician in the country, cannot be ruled out. Nasheed himself was imprisoned on controversial terrorism charges in the past by a rival government and was barred to run for the presidency ([Maldives Independent](#), June 4, 2018). In August 2018, a Progressive Party of the Maldives (PPM) supporter then brazenly called for Nasheed's decapitation ([MDP](#), August 26, 2018).

In the present context, Nasheed's ambition to bring a parliamentary system to the Maldives where he can serve as Prime Minister in the future rather than be sidelined as a speaker under the existing political arrangements have drawn criticism from several political camps in the country. He received criticism from former president, Dr. Mohamed Waheed Hassan Manik, of PPM,

who opined that the governing system of the “country should not be changed because someone has to sit in the political sidelines” ([Times of Addu](#), April 19). Nasheed’s MDP colleague and current Maldives President, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, has noted that Maldivian citizens have chosen a system of governance, and it would change only with their will ([Times of Addu](#), April 19).

Conclusion

Nasheed has often dominated the domestic and international political limelight by spearheading anti-Chinese and anti-Islamism campaigns, while embracing criticism from political rivals for criticizing Chinese investments, debt traps, and associated corruption issues under former president Abdulla Yameen ([Edition](#), December 14, 2020). He has nurtured no small number of powerful enemies who may have conspired to assassinate him. President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, meanwhile, termed the May 6 incident as an act of terror targeted against democracy and the Maldives’ thriving tourism economy. The government has accordingly ordered high-level investigations into the blast and experts from the Australian Federal Police (AFP) have been invited to join the investigations ([Sun.my](#), May 7). President Solih also appointed a British Special Envoy, Abbas Faiz, to monitor the investigation, prosecution, and trial of Nasheed’s attackers. While Nasheed is presently recuperating in Berlin, the ongoing investigation in the Maldives should unearth the deep-rooted political or Islamist conspiracy behind the assassination attempt.

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Kenya and DRC Sign Defense Pact to Cooperate Against Islamic State

Sunguta West

On April 21, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) signed agreements on security and defense amid growing threats from Islamic State in Central African Province (ISCAP), which is active in the eastern DRC. The security and defense pacts provide mechanisms for cooperation between the two countries in counter-terrorism, immigration, arms smuggling, cyber security, and customs and border control. Presidents Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya and Felix Tshisekendi of the DRC signed the agreements alongside other ministers of the economic and maritime transport sectors ([The Star](#), April 21). Nevertheless, the key focus was ISCAP, which the U.S. designated as a foreign terrorist organization in March ([Sabcnews.com](#), March 11, 2021).

ISCAP’s Background and Kenyan Responses

ISCAP is rooted in the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), which is an Islamist militant group originally from Uganda that has carried out numerous armed attacks, kidnappings, and killings in North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri regions of the DRC. Islamic State (IS) has also claimed responsibility, in ISCAP’s name, for attacks attributed to ADF because ISCAP and ADF overlap, with the latter having formally evolved into the former in 2019. Among ISCAP/ADF’s most notable attacks was in March 2021, when it raided the village of Bulongo in eastern DRC, killing at least 15 people ([Africanews](#), March 15).

In May 2020, IS further claimed two separate attacks blamed on ISCAP/ADF in Ituri and Beni, which left more than ten dead. In the attacks, seven bodies were found in Beni, near the border with Uganda, while another four were found in Ituri. Earlier, in April 2019, IS claimed responsibility for attacks on Kamago and Bovata villages near the town of Beni ([Africanews](#), May 15, 2020).

Kenya, meanwhile, has been backing efforts to end lingering armed conflicts in eastern DRC from well before ISCAP’s announcement as a group that succeeded the ADF in 2019. In 2013, for example, Kenya hosted Congolese parties in signing a peace agreement with the March 23 (“M23”) Movement, which is also known as the Congolese Revolutionary Army ([The East](#)

African, April 22). The rebel group took up arms against the government in 2012 alleging that the DRC government marginalized ethnic Tutsi and failed to honor earlier peace accords, but was unrelated to ISCAP/ADF. Although M23 allegedly dissolved after the Nairobi agreement, its ex-combatants have been accused of carrying out attacks in North Kivu in recent years (Africanews, February 12, 2017).

In April, Kenya escalated its presence in the DRC by sending additional troops to the country. This included an elite force of 200 soldiers deployed in the eastern part of the country through United Nations Security Council arrangements. Previously, only a small number of individual Kenyan military officers and military observers had been deployed for The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2556 (2020) (The Star, April 28). MONUSCO's Quick Reaction Force was expected to enable peacekeeping troops to patrol remote villages and deter further violence in the eastern DRC (Nation, May 1).

Kenya's Home Region Advantage?

Kenya started contributing to peacekeeping missions in 1979, and an estimated 55,000 soldiers have served in missions across the world (The Standard, April 22, 2021). However, the forthcoming deployment to the DRC will increase the numbers of Kenyan forces in the country from 200 troops to 1,600 soldiers and intelligence officers. They will replace a South African contingent that was based in the DRC and will operate in North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri regions. The Kenyan soldiers and intelligence officers in the DRC will further serve for a period ranging from four months to four years depending on whether they are under the Kenya–DRC security agreement or MONUSCO (Nation, May 1).

Many of the ISCAP/ADF fighters originate from East African countries, including Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Moreover, since populations in eastern DRC speak Swahili as one of their main dialects and use Swahili as a common language, it is easier for ISCAP to recruit and spread in country and throughout East Africa (Strategic Intelligence, April 23). At the same time, this also means Kenyan forces are well-placed to gather intelligence on ISCAP/ADC compared to non-Kiswahili-speaking peacekeepers from countries outside East Africa.

ISCAP/ADF has also received funding from a network in Kenya. In 2018, the Kenyan police detained Waleed

Ahmed Zein and Halima Adan Ali for allegedly moving funds for IS (Kenyas.co.ke, July 6, 2018). These two Kenyans ran an intricate financial facilitation network for IS, which spanned across Europe, the Middle East, and East Africa. Halima, working closely with Zein, had allegedly received large amounts of money from different parts of the world through *hawala*, a Somali financial payment medium, and forwarded funds to IS fighters in Syria, Libya, and the DRC (KBC, July 5, 2018).

Conclusion

The latest agreement between Kenya and the DRC is especially crucial for the latter, which needs to contain ISCAP/ADF's expansion. With prior experience in Somalia, Kenyan soldiers and intelligence officers can be expected to bring in a fresh viewpoint to the fight against the militants. However, given the harsh forest terrain, large number of rebel groups, and international interests on mineral exploitation, the DRC could prove more complex and challenging than any prior foreign military commitment for Kenya.

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Tigray Defense Forces Resist Ethiopian Army Offensive as Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethnic Militias Enter the Fray

Michael Horton

After nearly seven months of fighting, the war in Ethiopia's Tigray region shows no sign of abating. Instead, the highly predictable has occurred: the war has metastasized into a grinding insurgency that could continue for years. The ethnic-driven conflict has the potential to destabilize not only Ethiopia, but also the broader northeast African region ([Terrorism Monitor](#), December 17, 2020).

The war in Tigray began on November 4, 2020 when security forces aligned with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) attacked Northern Command Headquarters staffed by federal troops from the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) ([Nazret](#), November 2020). The ENDF responded by targeting TPLF forces and quickly securing most of Tigray's major towns, including the regional capital, Mekelle. Three weeks later, on November 28, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed declared that military operations had concluded ([al-Jazeera](#), November 28, 2020). However, since that statement was made, the fighting between all parties has intensified and taken on a dangerous ethnic component. As the violence in Tigray ratchets up, the window for ending the conflict in a way that might be amenable to all sides is closing.

The war comes at a time when Ethiopia faces multiple crises that threaten to upend the many gains the country has made over the last two decades. Besides Tigray, Ethiopia is also grappling with an entrenched insurgency in the regional state of Oromia, an economic crisis, rising commodity prices, and tensions with Egypt and Sudan over the filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

Guerrilla War in Tigray

The best way to win a war is to not start one you are likely to lose. While it appears that the TPLF fired the

first shots in the current war in Tigray, the Ethiopian government's decision to escalate and pursue what seems to be a scorched earth strategy in Tigray will be disastrous for all involved. The TPLF, now merged into the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF), is an organization that knows how to fight a guerrilla war. The TPLF fought a 15-year-long war against Ethiopia's Derg regime which was overthrown in 1991. Due largely to its war fighting capabilities, the TPLF was at the forefront in the defeat of the Derg.

Furthermore, the TPLF, or now TDF, possess the two components most critical to conducting a guerrilla war: deep knowledge of the geographic and socio-political terrain and a sympathetic population. The TPLF/TDF also has caches of weapons and an abundance of fighters as well as professionally trained officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs). Many of these officers and NCOs defected from federal forces in the lead up to—and in the immediate aftermath of—the current war. [1] TDF commanders include Lieutenant General Tadesse Werede and General Tsadkan Gebretensai, who is former Chief of Staff of the ENDF ([Borkena](#), January 22).

After the ENDF and soldiers from the Eritrean Army took over Tigray's major towns, TDF forces retreated to strongholds in the mountainous central interior of the region. There, the TDF consolidated forces and re-organized for a transition to guerrilla-style combat. Before the outbreak of hostilities, the TPLF-controlled regional militia functioned as a more traditional military force that was well-supplied and trained in the use of heavy weapons. The ENDF and the Ethiopian Air Force successfully targeted the TPLF-led regional militia's heavy equipment during the first weeks of the war. However, much of this equipment was abandoned by the TPLF before it was targeted. The TPLF leadership knew that such equipment would be useless for the kind of war that they would have to wage. Following what was a strategic retreat to the rugged interior, TDF forces re-organized into small, highly-mobile, lightly armed, detachments of ten to eighty fighters. These detachments were then further divided into mission-specific units. The TDF is using the same strategies that the TPLF used to defeat the Derg. [2]

Winning and maintaining the support of the local populace was at the heart of the TPLF's strategy during the 1970s and 1980s. TPLF leaders, who had thoroughly studied Mao Zedong's book, *On Guerilla Warfare*, understood that the goodwill of the local populace was what would sustain their movement and ultimately propel it to victory over the Derg. Consequently, any fighter caught abusing locals was punished or even executed by TPLF authorities. As a result, local support for the TPLF was consistent and invaluable. The local population shared food and resources with fighters, provided them with safe havens, and most critically, they supplied the TPLF with timely intelligence. [3] A million eyes were always watching the Derg forces.

Stoking Ethnic and Regional Tensions

The Ethiopian government's scorched earth strategy in Tigray has all but ensured the alienation of most ethnic Tigrayans. It has also ensured that the TDF will have no shortage of committed fighters and sympathetic supporters within Tigray. Following the TPLF's attack on ENDF Northern Command Headquarters in November 2020, Prime Minister Abiy's government deployed federal troops to Tigray. However, the government simultaneously encouraged Amhara militias, based in the regional state of Amhara located to the south of Tigray, to attack TPLF forces in western Tigray where land disputes between Amharas and Tigrayans are present. In addition to Amhara militias, the government also allowed Afar militias, based in the Afar regional state to the east of Tigray, to pursue Tigrayan rebels in southeastern Tigray ([Tadius](#), May 10).

Further, the Abiy government invited the Eritrean Army to cross into northern Tigray to help conduct its offensive against the TPLF/TDF. For months, the Ethiopian government denied that Eritrean troops were active in Tigray. However, in March, the Ethiopian government issued a statement saying the Eritrean troops were withdrawing from Tigray ([All Africa](#), March 26). Instead of withdrawing, Eritrean troops, often dressed in Ethiopian military uniforms, remain deployed across a large swath of northern Tigray ([al-Jazeera](#), April 17). They have controlled roads and occupied most border towns and villages in that area.

Both the military capabilities of the TDF and the broad-based support that it enjoys in Tigray contributed to the

Ethiopian government's decision to allow Eritrean troops to essentially occupy northern Tigray. The government also relies on the ethnic-based militias for support in the western and southern areas of Tigray. The ENDF alone is not capable of containing, much less defeating, the TDF. However, the reliance on ethnic militias and a foreign army to combat a domestic insurgency will greatly complicate any future de-escalation efforts.

Ethnic militias, federal troops, and the Eritrean Army are all accused of committing atrocities against civilians. Numerous reports of the mass rape of girls and women, the desecration of religious sites, and the destruction of farms and farm implements have emerged ([Ethiopia Insight](#), April 21). The attacks will further fuel ethnic tensions and entrench support for the TDF among Tigrayans. Young men and women—many of whom fear being raped or murdered—are fleeing to areas under the nominal control of the TDF. The TDF is also accused of carrying out attacks on Amhara civilians ([Africa Times](#), February 5).

The presence of Eritrean troops on Ethiopian territory also has the potential to undermine broader domestic support for Abiy's government ahead of national elections, which have been scheduled for June 21 ([Borkena](#), May 20). There is little reason for Eritrean troops to leave northern Tigray, and it is doubtful that the ENDF is in a position to force them to leave. Eritrea's president, Isaias Afwerki, is committed to destroying the TPLF, a one-time ally turned bitter enemy. Eritrean forces have also occupied areas, including Badme, that it fought Ethiopia for in the 1998-2000 war ([TRT World](#), December 12, 2020). At the same time, Eritrea's involvement in the war in Tigray has bolstered support for President Afwerki among ranking officers within the Eritrean Army.

Spillover from Tigray

Spillover from the war in Tigray is occurring. Beyond the involvement of Eritrea, the war also has the potential to draw in Sudan. The Fashaga triangle is a disputed area on the border of Sudan and Ethiopia that abuts parts of Ethiopia's Amhara and Tigray regions. Ownership of al-Fashaga, which is home to rich farmland, has long been disputed by Sudan and Ethiopia. Following a 2008 agreement, both countries followed a "soft-border" approach that allowed Ethiopian farmers as well as sea-

sonal laborers from both countries to access farms and land in the disputed area.

On December 15, 2020, Amhara militias are alleged to have attacked Sudanese forces in al-Fashaga. The Sudanese government responded by sending its own militias into al-Fashaga to takeover Amhara dominated villages and farms ([All Africa](#), May 10). It is not clear which side made the first move in al-Fashaga, but it is clear that the war in Tigray led to a shift in the power dynamics around al-Fashaga. As Amhara militias were re-deployed to fight in Tigray, it is likely that Sudan seized on the opportunity to re-claim valuable territory. Sudanese forces, primarily comprised of local militias, now occupy most of al-Fashaga. Periodic fighting between Amhara militias and Sudanese militias continues. The Amhara regard al-Fashaga as part of their ancestral territory and will fight for its return. Given the fact that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed relies heavily on the support of Ethiopia's Amhara, it will be hard for him to concede to any demands from Sudan for the return of al-Fashaga.

The seizure of al-Fashaga is also linked to Ethiopia's filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Control of al-Fashaga is viewed by Sudan as potential leverage in future negotiations over water rights ([The Africa Report](#), January 13). The war in Tigray and support for the TDF will undoubtedly also be viewed by Sudan and other regional powers as a way to place more pressure on the Ethiopian government if it does not soften its stance on the filling of the GERD. Sudan has a long history of supporting the TPLF. However, as yet, no indications have yet emerged that Sudan intends to support rebels in Tigray. The war in Tigray could easily induce a return to the widespread use of armed proxies by Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. Each of these countries have supported and armed rebel groups within one another's borders over the last four decades, often with disastrous consequences.

Future Outlook

The war in Tigray shows every sign of only becoming more severe. The early gains made by the ENDF and Eritrean forces against the TDF have not led to any decisive defeats of the TDF. Eritrean troops occupy much of northern Tigray while the ENDF controls the regional capital of Mekelle as well as parts of eastern and north-eastern Tigray. Amhara militias control much of western

Tigray. The TDF controls most of the central region of Tigray. A deadly stalemate has taken hold and it is civilians who will suffer most as famine looms.

It is unlikely that the TDF will be defeated over the short or medium term. The TDF will draw on a deep well of local support to sustain itself over the coming months and, quite possibly, the coming years. Neither the ENDF nor the Eritrean Army are capable of launching the kind of sustained clearing operation that would be required to remove the TDF from central Tigray. Such an operation would also further and, rightly, provoke the ire of the international community. Instead, Ethiopia faces a grinding insurgency that may well draw in additional regional powers like Sudan. A war that was supposed to last weeks may persist for years barring meaningful negotiations.

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Notes

[1] Author interview with a security analyst based in the region, May 2021.

[2] Ibid.

[3] See: John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975-1991* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jenny Hammond, *Fire from the Ashes: A Chronicle of the Revolution in Tigray, Ethiopia, 1975-1991* (Red Sea Press, 1998).