

Introduction

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Northeast Africa has a long history of violent conflicts spanning long periods of time and covering large geographical spaces. The cycles of conflicts predate the colonial period, and only got worse and more complex during the colonial and postcolonial periods. None of the past conflicts have been on the scale, intensity and damage of the 2020–2022 Ethiopian civil war in Tigray region. The aspirations of the region's citizens for democratization and respect of human rights were thrown back by decades. Even though a ceasefire signed in November 2022 in Pretoria, South Africa, still holds, neither the root causes of the conflict nor its attendant humanitarian challenges are addressed. Meanwhile, conflicts in other parts of Ethiopia persist as does the repression in Eritrea; Somalia continues to grapple with the herculean task of resuscitating the state that had collapsed in the 1990s; and Sudan's treacherous transition from a three-decade Islamist rule broke down with the outbreak of conflict in April 2023.

As the Horn of Africa appears to be imploding, the perennial competition among middle and global powers for a foothold and influence in the region has resumed with renewed intensity, worsening the region's woes. Much as local actors in the region have participated in various ways in the Gulf Cooperation Council's war in Yemen since

2015, actors outside the Horn of Africa are actively taking sides in the region's ongoing conflicts and latent tensions. In the process of global competition for the region and local jockeying with bigger powers, active wars and various forms of social conflict are tearing the region apart, leaving issues of human rights and democratisation by the wayside. In order to bring these critical challenges and progressive aspirations to the fore, we have called for a special issue on "Democratisation, Social Conflict, War and Human Rights in the Horn of Africa". However, the course of this special issue was also affected by the rapidly deteriorating developments in the region. Indeed, many contributors were unable to maintain their initial commitment and withdrew. More generally, the region's looming predicament have forced us to rethink and refocus the entire project in an attempt to provide more specific insights into the crisis engulfing the region and its key actors, which also account for the delayed publication of this issue. Given the severity of the conflict in northern Ethiopia, the special issue prioritised the complex events surrounding this conflict and aimed to provide sound and balanced tools for understanding the multilayered developments unfolding in the region.

After Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power with palpable optimism and promises of peace, democratic change and synergistic progress at home and across the region, Ethiopia descended into pockets of instability and, two years later, all-out war broke out in the northern regional state of Tigray. After the regional ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), attacked federal troops stationed in the regional state, the federal government enlisted the special forces and militias of the Amhara regional state and the armed forces of neighbouring Eritrea in its war against the TPLF. Dubbed "law enforcement", the operations quickly turned into a fierce war of attrition with devastating effects on the civilian population (including refugees), physical infrastructure and the environment. The four warring parties are reported to have committed various violations of internationally recognised human rights and humanitarian law. However, the dust has not yet fully settled to make a definitive assessment of the extent of the damage and apportion responsibility, but the resulting humanitarian crisis continues to fester more than six months after a permanent cessation of hostilities agreement was signed in November 2022.

The submitted contributions investigate the layered transitions that the region has experienced over the past five years, shedding light on the complex interplay of actors and interests at local and regional levels, including the wider Red Sea region. Within this framework, special attention is paid to the ongoing tensions and conflicts in nearly all the countries of the region, assessing their roots, dynamics and long-term consequences. The contributions investigate the developments on the ground from a plurality of geographical and disciplinary perspectives. Uoldelul's paper locates the complex trajectories of nationalisms in the region in a diachronic perspective rooted in the depths of history, with the aim of disentangling contemporary political developments

from the flattening of politics and thus taking into account the multilayered genealogies of nationalisms in the region. Similarly, the contributions by Awet and Daniel-Paulos seek to trace the key steps that led to the recent conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and also to the betrayal of the promises of peace initially made when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in Ethiopia. Awet examines the wider background and immediate context of PM Abiy's bold rapprochement with Eritrea and the impact of their shared enmity toward the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) on the peace process. Indeed, he argues that this shared enmity overshadowed the contradictions in the newly normalized Ethio-Eritrean relationship and the ominous prospects of its stagnation and backsliding. On a similar path, Daniel and Paulos discuss critical challenges of democratisation (including issues of transitional justice) in Eritrea and Ethiopia, examined through the lens of historicity. In their discussion they analyse both the similarities observed in the experiences of both countries in the early 1990s and divergences in the paths they have taken. Particular attention is paid to the models of transitional justice that both countries have adopted and how they have fared. In their conclusions Daniel and Paulos also identify some of the most critical challenges of peace and security in the Greater Horn of Africa.

Abdalgani's and Zoppi's contributions open different geographical and thematic scenarios focusing on the Somali space and dealing with issues of diaspora and post-conflict peacebuilding. Abdalgani's contribution seeks to identify and assess internal and external obstacles to post-conflict peacebuilding. He identifies a number of internal and external challenges faced by Somaliland in post-conflict peacebuilding, such as constitutional gaps, individual and group interests, the role of donors, and the complex interplay of the media, which could play a clear role in peacebuilding but could also exacerbate existing tensions and mistrust.

Zoppi's contribution seeks to examine patterns of Somali transnational engagement in order to assess their modes of interaction and their relationship to societal dynamics and the ongoing federal state building project. In his analysis, Zoppi discusses the role of the Somali diaspora in shaping governance in Somalia through its vital role in securing income and investment, and thus participating in state-building initiatives, as well as in the peace and conflict dynamics engulfing the homeland. Zoppi argues that the Somali diaspora is caught in a double and contradictory process, as its engagement can both undermine state-building processes and promote development and security. Eventually Yonatan paper explores the impact of the cybersphere on conflict-torn countries, focusing on the transformative potential of new media public spheres in peace-building efforts. Taking as case study PalTalk, Yonatan argues that this platform has developed into a secure and inclusive space for vibrant communal discussions among Eritreans, compensating for limitations in physical public spheres. He further argues that focusing on peace and reconciliation, exiled Eritreans have also the opportunity to effectively document human rights abuses and challenge dominant state-led narratives on militarism and conscription in Eritrea.