

Armed Groups Along Sudan's Eastern Frontier: An Overview and Analysis

By John Young



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Acronyms and abbreviations

ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Movement
AFD	Alliance for Freedom and Democracy
BPLM	Benishangul People's Liberation Movement
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
CPMT	Civilian Protection Monitoring Team
DMLE	Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrea
DMLEK	Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrean Kunama
DMLT	Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Tigray
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
EDA	Eritrean Democratic Alliance
EDPUF	Ethiopian Democratic Patriotic United Front
EDU	Ethiopian Democratic Union
EIRF	Eritrean Islamic Reform Front
EIRM	Eritrean Islamic Reform Movement
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ELF-RC	Eritrean Liberation Front-Revolutionary Council
ENA	Eritrean National Alliance
EPDM	Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPM	Eritrean People's Movement
EPPF	Ethiopian People's Patriotic Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
ESPA	Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement
EUUF	Ethiopian Unity Front
GoS	Government of Sudan
GPDF	Gambella People's Democratic Front
GPLM	Gambella People's Liberation Movement
GPLP	Gambella People's Liberation Party

IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
NCP	National Congress Party
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NIF	National Islamic Front
OAG	Other Armed Group
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
ONLF	Ogaden National Liberation Front
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PDF	Popular Defence Force
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
SSDF	South Sudan Defence Force
SSLM	South Sudan Liberation Movement
TAND	Tigray Alliance for National Democracy
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees

About the author

John Young is a Canadian academic who first arrived in Sudan in 1986 to work as a journalist with the *Sudan Times* and stayed for three years. He then returned to Canada to complete a Ph.D in Political Science at Simon Fraser University, where he is currently a senior research associate with the Institute of Governance Studies.

Young spent most of the 1990s in Ethiopia as a professor at Addis Ababa University and doing field research in the areas of ethnic federalism, political parties, and the Ethiopian–Eritrean War. He then worked for the Canadian International Development Agency in Addis Ababa as an adviser on the Sudan peace process. Leaving Addis, he moved to Nairobi and was assigned to work as an adviser to Ambassador Daniel Mboya, special envoy for peace in Sudan for the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) secretariat. After working briefly, still in Nairobi, for the UN news agency IRIN as the head of information analysis, he took a position as a monitor with the Civilian Protection Monitoring Team (CPMT) working in South Sudan, and also with the African Union Ceasefire Commission, for the next two years.

Since leaving the CPMT in October 2004 he has lived in Khartoum, working as an independent consultant and carrying out academic research in the areas of peace, security, and regional relations. Young has written *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) and published widely in academic journals. His most recent publications include articles on the South Sudan Defence Forces, an analysis of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, a consideration of the legacy of John Garang, an examination of the conflict and peace agreement in eastern Sudan, a study of the White Army, and an IGAD commissioned assessment of the North–South peace process. Forthcoming studies include an evaluation of the foreign policy of the National Congress Party and of the transition of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army from a military organization to a ruling political party.

Abstract

Borderlands in the Horn of Africa have long been the focus of conflict, partly because they are ill-defined, but more because they are areas where government authority tends to be minimal. As a result, they provide a suitable environment for the development and operation of armed groups dedicated to political or criminal activities. Where these groups have a political character they are largely a response to state domination by minority groups or are the product of government efforts to destabilize or overthrow neighbouring governments.

This study examines armed groups along Sudan’s eastern frontier, analysing them both in historical terms and in the context of rapidly changing governments and inter-state relations. During Sudan’s first and second civil wars dissident southerners gained the support of neighbouring states. Successive national governments in turn supported armed groups opposed to the regimes in Addis Ababa and later Asmara in a pattern that has continued until the present.

Given the undemocratic character of governments in the Horn, the violence-prone inter-state system they have produced, and the wide availability of small arms, the study concludes that instability and the dislocation of civilian populations will continue.



I. Introduction

This paper provides introductory information and analysis on a range of Other Armed Groups (OAGs)¹ operating along Sudan’s eastern borders with Ethiopia and Eritrea. It presents an understanding of how such groups operate within the broader framework of inter-state relations in the Horn of Africa, a region that has produced a large number of OAGs and suffered high levels of violent conflict over the past five decades. For the purposes of this study the Horn of Africa is considered as constituting Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia (and its various components), and Sudan.

The focus is on armed groups from Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, which are based in the eastern borderlands of Sudan, transit Sudan’s eastern borderlands, or are known to have operated in Sudan. The study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the agents of political violence in the Horn, and of Sudan’s relations with its eastern neighbours. It is also hoped that this study will be of use to those concerned with security and with disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) issues in Sudan, since the frequently well-armed border tribes—which often have links to Ethiopia and become caught up in the tumultuous political changes that have affected the region—are proving particularly difficult to disarm. For the most part this study focuses on the past five years but, as this research demonstrates, a much longer time frame is needed to understand the development of these groups.

In the case of some groups such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which has operated as a guerrilla movement along the borderlands of Ethiopia and Sudan since July 1973, there is a wealth of information and hence no need to provide additional background in this report.² Only the recent activities of this group in the area are discussed below. Other groups, such as the South Sudan Defence Force (SSDF), the Eastern Front, and the White Army, have been the subject of other HSBA studies, and again will not be taken up in detail in this report.³ In most cases, therefore, the groups considered here are quite obscure. As a result, detailed information on their leadership, ideology, numbers

of members, armaments, areas of operation, and fighting capacity is limited and less than completely reliable.

Material for this study is drawn largely from the author's knowledge, based on two decades of carrying out security-related studies in the Horn. It also draws on limited and eclectic published research, media, and Internet reports; testimony provided by experts, some of whom work in the area of intelligence for states in the region; UN sources; interviews, in a very few cases, with members of OAGs that are or were operating along the eastern frontier; and a visit to Addis Ababa on 11–22 March 2007. Time and resources were not available to conduct field border studies. In a highly politicized context where fact and rumour are often confused and there are many incentives to subvert the truth, the reliability of the information on these OAGs must be approached critically. Information on weapons sources—unless, as is frequently the case, the origin lies with the governments of the region—is even more suspect. One reason for preparing this paper, therefore, is to identify the considerable gaps in knowledge about armed groups and weapons flows in this isolated and volatile region.

The principle findings of this study are:

- The shared frontier lands of Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea and have never been under the complete control of central governments and as a result have long provided a conducive environment for criminals and rebels who often exchange or overlap these roles.
 - The rebel groups operating on the frontier appeal for support from neighbouring states and in some cases are the creations of these states. Hence their activities threaten to produce inter-state conflicts.
 - The National Islamic Front (NIF) attempted to undermine the governments in Asmara and Addis Ababa by supporting a range of Islamist and secular opposition groups. The Eritrean and Ethiopian governments responded by assisting the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the northern opposition under the umbrella National Democratic Alliance (NDA), as well as sending their own armies into Sudan.
 - The outbreak of the Ethiopia–Eritrea war (1998–2000) led both governments to attempt reconciliation with Sudan. Ethiopia and Sudan reconciled and it appeared that both countries stopped supporting each others' armed opponents.
- Unable to mend relations with Khartoum, Asmara continued to support the NDA and in addition assisted armed groups opposed to the government in Addis Ababa. Sudan, Ethiopia, and Yemen in turn supported a range of political and armed groups opposed to the regime in Asmara.
 - Opposition to the official results of the 2005 Ethiopian national elections led to an increase in civil disobedience and threats to launch insurgencies. While there has been some military action in western Ethiopia near the border area, to date this has not posed a threat to the regime.
 - Problems in Gambella have produced a number of armed groups and the proximity of the border as well as cross-border tribal allegiances have periodically led to insecurity in adjacent areas of Sudan.
 - Since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) on 9 January 2005, the SPLM/A has been able to exert more control over the border area with Ethiopia and this should reduce the activities of armed groups there.
 - In October 2006 Eritrea mediated the end of the armed conflict in eastern Sudan, and Asmara and Khartoum also reached an agreement to end their support for one another's opponents on the frontier.
 - Until the states of the region undergo a democratic transformation and develop the capacity to police their frontiers, and genuine efforts are made to empower the disenfranchised that provide the support base for rebellions, these areas will continue to be fertile grounds for the emergence of armed groups. 📌

II. Theoretical starting points

This overview and analysis of OAGs on the frontiers of the Horn is informed by the assumption that these groups risk precipitating inter-state conflicts because they are frequently supported and sometimes created by neighbouring governments. Moreover, these groups also pose a threat to peacemaking efforts in the region, such as those of the CPA. Lionel Cliffe and others call the practice of governments supporting opposition groups in neighbouring states one of ‘mutual intervention’ (Cliffe, 1999, p. 91), and most of the long-running violent conflicts in the Horn provide evidence of such involvement.

Eritrea’s insurgent groups have received support from Sudan at different times since the 1960s. South Sudan’s rebels in the country’s first civil war (1955–72) were assisted by neighbouring states and by others from even further afield, including Israel. The various opposition groups that fought the Ethiopian Derg in the 1970s and 1980s all received support from countries in the region, including Sudan. When the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) overthrew the Derg in 1991, it was not long before they too were confronted by insurgents, usually operating from the countries’ borderlands with Sudan and invariably receiving outside support. The SPLM/A and armed groups in eastern Sudan and Darfur also received support from countries in the region. The opposition to Eritrea’s regime currently receives assistance from neighbouring states, while the Eritrean regime in turn supports armed groups in Ethiopia, Somalia, and possibly Sudan. Most of these armed groups operate on the frontiers.

As a result, local-level or intra-state conflicts always risk becoming inter-state conflicts. Cliffe, however, does not fully address the extent to which local-level armed groups become elements in regional struggles, or the extent to which neighbouring governments use these armed groups to pursue broader political objectives. There is a real danger that the struggles of local-level armed groups will be overlooked, and for periods even ignored, while the international community focuses on real or potential inter-state conflicts.

At the same time, security analysts in the Horn have noted the role of neighbouring states or regional security organizations in bringing these armed groups into peace processes. Among the most significant examples are: the critical role of Emperor Haile Selassie in concluding the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, which ended Sudan’s first civil war; and the leading role that the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) assumed in bringing about the CPA that ended Sudan’s second North–South civil war (1983–2005).

The political economy of Sudan’s eastern frontier is typical of many areas in the Horn of Africa in terms of the poverty of its people, fierce competition for resources in conditions of scarcity, and the role of the state in controlling the allocation of such resources. This has led to the emergence of armed groups that direct their efforts against the state. According to John Markakis:

Because it controls the production and distribution of material and social resources, the state has become the focus of conflict. Access to state power is essential for the welfare of its subjects, but such access has never been equally available to all the people of the Horn, and to many it has never been available at all.

(Markakis, 1994, p. 217)

Whether the problem is conceptualized as one of exploitation of the periphery by the centre, internal colonialism, or marginalization, the poverty of the many and the enormous wealth of a few—who are invariably linked to the state—form the background for most conflicts in the region.

Markakis further maintains that while ethnicity is frequently the basis on which armed groups in the Horn mobilize, the actual conflict is a product of the domination of the states by particular communities, who use the state for their personal enrichment and that of their ethnic cohorts. The oppressed of the peripheries thus respond in kind. However, these conflicts can just as easily take other forms, such as the significance of region in the case of southern Sudan, or clan in the case of Somalia. Like Cliffe, however, Markakis fails to appreciate fully the extent to which governments stimulate conflict and support armed groups in neighbouring states in order to further their own interests. This study provides numerous examples of both types of conflict. 📌

III. Sudan's Eastern frontier in context

Because of its remote setting, successive Sudanese and Ethiopian governments (and, after its liberation in 1991, the Eritrean government) have exerted little control over their shared frontier. As a result, these borderlands have long been inhabited by *shifita* groups, or bandits, some of which have taken on a political character, or have started as political organizations and then became *shiftas*, or have combined both roles (Crummey, 1986, p. 23). Indeed, the pattern in the Horn follows closely the broader comparative studies carried out by Eric Hobsbawm in his classic work, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (1965), which includes a case study drawn from the Ethiopia–Eritrea border area. These studies also confirm recurring observations by the author and other regional analysts that activities by armed groups in the Horn often combine politics, crime, and revenge in ways that are all but impossible to disentangle. Probably the best known Ethiopian *shifita* rebel, who operated in the largely unpopulated lands west of Lake Tana, which continue to provide sanctuary for guerrillas and *shiftas* today, was the future Emperor Twedros—one of Ethiopia's most acclaimed emperors (Zewde, 1991, p. 83). Many groups that have combined *shifita* and political activities emerged in the frontier lands, as well as a range of guerrilla/political parties, two of which currently lead the governments in Asmara and Addis Ababa.

The frontier has also attracted slave and ivory traders, largely from the Ethiopian highlands. The availability of weapons to highland traders in the 19th century—mostly from Italy and other European sources, reaching the highlands from the Red Sea ports of Djibouti and Massawa—gave the traders dominance over the settled peasants on the northern Sudanese plains, as well as over groups such as the Ingessna of South Blue Nile (believed to be descended from escaped slaves), and the more warlike Nuer, Anuak, Shilluk, and Murle peoples. During this period, weapons flowed to the frontier between Ethiopia and Sudan. It was not until the 1920s that the British administration tried

to stop the trade in slaves, and thereby reduce the inflow of arms (Abdel Rahim, 1969, p. 91). The frontier remained an area of limited development—despite the high levels of commerce—with poor transport and communications, low population levels, and disease. These conditions encouraged a wide range of armed groups, both politically and criminally motivated, to operate in the area.

The various components of the largely pastoralist Beja, Rashida, and Beni Amar peoples live on both sides of the Sudan–Eritrea border. The situation of ethnic groups along Sudan's border with Ethiopia is more complex and has important implications for security and for the operation of armed groups. From the Eritrean border down to just north of the Blue Nile River, the international boundary represents a genuine ethnic divide with only a handful of small pastoralist tribes traversing the two countries. No major tribes live on both sides of the border. From the Blue Nile south to the border with Kenya, however, many tribes live on either side of the frontier, most notably the Berta, Anuak, Nuer, Mursi, Murle, and Yangatum; the Gumuz and Hamar are based in Ethiopia but also cross the border area.

Many of these tribes pursue a pastoralist economy and are very combative. Under such conditions, these borderlands and border peoples have become transit belts for conflicts that either begin at the centre of the nation and then develop along the frontiers, or else begin on the frontier and subsequently engage the central state governments, or remain focused locally along the frontier. Even where the conflicts are local and seemingly non-political, they always risk taking on a larger and more significant character due to the volatile political environment of the Horn. 🗨️

IV. Armed groups along the frontier 1961–74

The period 1961 to 1974 corresponds with the rise of armed groups opposed to the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and involved in his displacement in 1974. Although the emperor was ultimately overthrown by the government's own army in a coup, a number of armed opposition groups were formed during this period, some of which operated along Sudan's eastern frontier.

Angered at Haile Selassie's arbitrary ending of Eritrean autonomy, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) launched an insurrection in 1961 against the regime, drawing on support from its tribal cohorts on both sides of the Sudan–Ethiopia border (Markakis, 1987, p. 102). Later, the ELF was joined by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The tribes overlapping the border, and most notably the various components of the Beja, frequently gave humanitarian support to their fellow tribesmen taking part in the conflict, while successive governments in Khartoum gave varying levels of political and military assistance to these groups. Support from the Sudanese state usually followed a pattern: when relations between Khartoum and Addis Ababa were positive, or there was an effort to improve them, support would decline, only to be resumed when relations deteriorated or Khartoum wanted to send a message to its neighbouring regime.

Sudanese governments followed this pattern with both the ELF and the EPLF, although generally they were more favourably disposed to the ELF because it had an overtly Muslim character; the EPLF was secular and Marxist and most of its supporters were Christians from the highlands (Markakis, 1987, p. 133). It appears that both groups, however, were permitted to import weapons and equipment through Port Sudan.⁴ In addition, the ELF and EPLF gained considerable support from border-inhabiting peoples and from politically-minded Sudanese, particularly those on the political left.

Haile Selassie's regime replied in kind to Sudan's support for the dissidents. In the mid-1960s, Anyanya, the southern Sudanese rebel movement, emerged

as the leading element in the insurrection against Khartoum. Its leaders turned to neighbouring governments for support and Addis Ababa responded readily. This assistance continued until peace was achieved in 1972. Indeed, it was Haile Selassie's threat to end this support that provided an incentive for the Anyanya rebels to agree to peace. When the emperor was overthrown, however, a new Ethiopian regime came to power, which soon assisted the development of a well-armed opposition in southern Sudan. 📄

V. Armed groups along the frontier 1974–91

This period begins with the rise of the Derg, or military regime, in Ethiopia, which in turn produced a new configuration of armed groups opposed to the new rulers. It ends with the defeat of the Derg in 1991 by a collection of rebel groups from Ethiopia and Eritrea. The key groups that emerged in this period, such as the ELF, the EPLF, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), are the subject of many studies and thus not considered in detail. Instead, to the extent that information is available, the focus here is on less well-known armed groups that operated along the border.

The change of regime in Ethiopia did not produce a settlement of the Eritrean conflict and Eritrean dissidents were soon joined by a host of armed Ethiopian opposition groups, some of which received support from Khartoum. Those such as the TPLF, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), and the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) were established in Ethiopia but conducted operations from Sudan, while the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) conducted operations in eastern Ethiopia and along the Sudanese frontier but prioritized links with Somalia. All of these groups also operated within the camps of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) near the border in Sudan, and through relief organizations the rebels mobilized political and financial support among the refugees.

The TPLF, OLF, and EPRP largely derived from the Ethiopian student movement. Marxist–Leninist in orientation they gained only nominal assistance from Sudanese governments. The EDU, however, was dedicated to reinstating the feudal regime and received considerable political and military support from Saudi Arabia, the Sudanese government of Jaffar Nimeiri, and the CIA (Young, 1997, p. 125). It also received funds through its control of the sesame crops in Humera on the Sudanese border. The EDU was largely defeated by the TPLF in the late 1970s (Young, 1997, p. 105), but continued to operate as an armed group until the late 1980s. It still functions as a political

organization, with Ras Mangesha Seyoum, now resident in Toronto, serving as a patron for one of its factions. In 1991 this faction of the EDU was registered as a political party in Ethiopia, but it continues to face restrictions in Tigray. Elements of the EDU joined other dissident groups, some of which still operate in the Sudan–Ethiopia border area. Since its inception the EDU has had a strong shifta element and after the defeat of the organization as a rebel force some of its members continued to operate independently in the largely unpopulated and lawless lands west of Lake Tana.

The EPRP was also largely defeated by the TPLF in the early 1980s and one faction of it formed the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM) in 1989, which operated as a guerrilla group on Sudan's border in alliance with the TPLF (Young, 1997, p. 82). The EPDM became a component of the EPRDF, and in 1991 it became part of the EPRDF national government after changing its name to the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM). The ANDM won control of the regional state of the Amhara people, taking in the areas of Shoa, Gojam, Wollo, and Gondar, which borders Sudan. However, in 1994 as a result of administrative reforms, the ANDM lost control of much of the western part of this area which was subsumed within the state of Benishangul-Gumuz on the Sudanese border.

In challenging the Ethiopian regime these various rebel groups reduced the threat that the regime posed to successive governments in Khartoum, which were broadly aligned with the West until 1989. At various times the rebels received assistance from Sudanese governments and private citizens, but none were fully controlled by Khartoum. Nonetheless, the groups' political activities within Sudan's borders continued (above all in UNHCR camps), they opened offices in Khartoum, and they crossed back and forth to Ethiopia. The Sudanese state made no attempt to stop these activities, lacking either the capacity or the inclination to do so (Young, 1997, p. 130).

In retaliation for Sudan's support for, or its acceptance of, Ethiopian rebels on its territory the Derg assisted the 1983 revolt of a group of southern soldiers of the Government of Sudan (GoS) national army, who later became the SPLM/A. In particular, the Derg permitted the SPLM/A to use the Pinyudo and Itang refugee camps in Gambella as a headquarters and training centre. With the support of his Eastern Bloc backers, the Derg's leader, Mengistu Haile

Mariam, also provided the southern rebels with weapons, training, a radio station, bases, and false identity papers. Since the Derg could not support any armed group that favoured self-determination at a time when its opponents espoused the same principle, it also ensured that the newly formed SPLM/A developed a programme committed to a united New Sudan (Young, 2005, p. 540). The Derg played a major role in the elevation of Dr John Garang to lead this organization: according to Peter Adwok, Garang was largely a pale imitation of his Ethiopian benefactor and did his bidding (Adwok, 2000, p. 92).

Although Derg external military support was concentrated on the SPLM/A, it also armed many civilian militias, notably on Ethiopia's eastern and western frontiers. Of particular interest to this study is the Derg arming of the Berta militia in Benishangul and the Anuak militia in Gambella.⁵ This support was a response to Sudan's support for Ethiopian rebel groups and in particular to counter EPRP efforts to mobilize the Berta and Anuak peoples in the anti-Derg struggle. These efforts, together with the contributions of the EPLF and TPLF, produced the Gambella and Berta liberation movements that operated in the border area.

Khartoum may have provided some minimal assistance to these groups that transited the South Blue Nile and eastern Upper Nile borders with Ethiopia, but the Sudanese governments of Nimeiri (1969–85), the Transitional Council that replaced Nimeiri (1985–86), and the government of Sadig Al-Mahdi (1986–89) found themselves confronting a powerful SPLM/A that had a level of support from Ethiopia far beyond anything they could supply to Mengistu's enemies.

The EPLF and the TPLF supported the formation of the Gambella Liberation Front, which later became the Gambella People's Liberation Movement (GPLM), and was largely made up of Anuak. To counter this threat the Derg and the SPLM/A, which had a major base in the UNHCR refugee camps in Gambella, distributed or sold weapons to the indigenous population, further fuelling violent conflicts in the area. This practice of arming local communities continues to the present day and is not restricted to the Ethiopian side of the border. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was also supported by the EPLF and TPLF—in particular by the former, which helped the OLF to capture the Benishangul capital of Assossa in 1989. However, the departure of the EPLF

from the region a few months later and the OLF's failure to mobilize the indigenous population meant that the campaign quickly faltered and the OLF was soon removed by the Derg (Young, 1999, pp. 332–33).

The collapse of the Derg in 1991 and the assumption of state power by the EPLF and the EPRDF in Asmara and Addis Ababa, respectively, led to a new configuration of armed groups in the Sudan–Ethiopia border area. 📌

VI. Armed groups along the frontier 1991–98

The period 1991–98 corresponds with the rise to power of the EPRDF and the EPLF and this section considers the groups that opposed these regimes. The groups were largely supported by the GoS and operated along Sudan's borders with Eritrea and Ethiopia. The period ends with the start of the Ethiopia–Eritrea war, which again changed the configuration of armed groups along Sudan's eastern frontier.

The level of armed group activity on the frontier initially declined after the EPLF and EPRDF took power. The changes in regimes in Ethiopia and Eritrea largely coincided with the National Islamic Front (NIF) coming to power in Sudan in the 1989 coup. Since the NIF had supported the Eritrean and Ethiopian rebels, there was reason to hope for a new era of harmonious relations in the Horn. This period also marked the end of the Cold War and of Soviet engagement in the region, as well as—initially at least—the fading of Western interest. However, the ideologically driven NIF began a campaign to export its version of political Islam to its neighbouring states, in particular to Eritrea and Ethiopia. As a result, peace did not last long.

The NIF campaign was multifaceted and involved a major expansion of the Sudanese embassy in Addis Ababa, the establishment of an embassy in Asmara, and providing Muslim students from Ethiopia and Eritrea with educational opportunities in Sudan. It also used Sudan's state radio to spread Islamist teachings and propaganda, and employed a wide variety of Islamic 'NGOs' with close ties to the government to pursue its policies. The view professed in Khartoum was that Muslims in Ethiopia and Eritrea suffered at the hands of Christians and—according to Hassan al-Turabi, leader of the NIF—'Ethiopia will self-destruct in the near future, thus paving the way for the establishment of an Islamic Oromo state and resulting in a chain of Islamic polities extending from Sudan to the Indian Ocean' (quoted in Cliffe, 1999, p. 99).

Anxious to avoid conflict with Sudan, the governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia repeatedly warned the NIF in Khartoum to stop its activities, but to no

avail. The breaking point for Eritrea was Sudanese assistance for a multinational group of Islamist guerrillas that entered the country's northern region in December 1993 (Cliffe, 1999, p. 100). The pivotal event in Ethiopia–Sudan relations was the attempted assassination of the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak on the streets of Addis Ababa in June 1995. Both Ethiopia and Egypt concluded that this involved support from elements in the Sudanese ruling party (Young, 2002, p. 32). In Eritrea, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ, the successor organization to the EPLF) broke relations with Sudan and turned the Sudanese embassy in Asmara over to the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), a broad conglomeration of opponents to the regime in Sudan. Ethiopia permitted the Sudanese embassy to remain open, but only with a skeletal staff. Both countries resumed relations with the SPLM/A and were soon providing the southern Sudanese rebels with arms and bases in their countries.

Meanwhile, after the formation of the EPRDF-and PFDJ-led governments, some Ethiopian and Eritrean groups felt left out of the political dispensation and continued their armed struggles, largely from Sudanese territory and with the support of the NIF. Notable among these groups were the EPRP, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). These were generally secular in character but they could still be used to create instability. In the case of the ELF and the OLF, both of which drew support from many Muslims, the NIF attempted to implant its ideology, albeit with limited success.

Another armed group that emerged at this time and continues to exist in the wild lands west of Lake Tana is Kafegn. The origins of Kafegn lie in the groups set up under the Derg to combat TPLF incursions into Gondar. Its membership appears to have been made up of Amhara peasants, some of whom had probably been in the Ethiopian Democratic Union. After the overthrow of the Derg, Kafegn declined but was not eliminated. In May 1993, the author encountered government soldiers on the western shores of Lake Tana who had been wounded in clashes with dissidents in the area. The soldiers reported that they were fighting former members of the EPRP and Derg soldiers who were opposed to the EPRDF and Tigrayan dominance. These dissidents were thought to have been led by General Haile Meles, a former Derg official and may have been Kafegn. The Ethiopian army searched for Haile in eastern

Gondar but never found him. In 1993 he was wounded and evacuated to Sudan where he had good relations with government officials. Khartoum refused to extradite him and he continued to be a source of controversy in Sudanese–Ethiopian relations until he was granted asylum in New Zealand in late 1999. By the time of Haile’s evacuation to Sudan, Kafegn was in serious disarray. The boundary changes that transferred most of the area west of Lake Tana to Benishangul in 1994, however, served to reactivate the group, which was then renamed the Kafegn Patriotic Front. The group is known to have crossed into Sudan and to have received support from the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF).

While Sudan’s Military Intelligence handled the operational side of relations with Ethiopian and Eritrean armed groups, NIF leader Hassan al-Turabi assumed the major role in overall policy, including the subversion of neighbouring countries. With the goal of Islamist domination in Ethiopia and Eritrea, he looked to Islamist armed groups to do his bidding wherever possible. This policy was generally more successful along the Eritrean border, where tribes overlap and the population is overwhelmingly Muslim. In the borderlands of Ethiopia the population is a mix of Christian, Muslim, and pagan, but moving south from the Tigray and Amhara regions to Benishangul–Gumuz (opposite Sudan’s Blue Nile State) the number of Muslims increases and some of the same tribes are found on both sides of the border. Disa, a village north-west of Damazin and the regional capital of Blue Nile State, therefore became a centre for the SAF to train and supply various dissident groups (Young, 1999, p. 344).

In particular, the Sudan government developed relations with the Benishangul People’s Liberation Movement (BPLM), which was ideologically close to the Khartoum regime. The BPLM drew support from various tribes (Gumuz, Koma, Maa), but above all from the entirely Muslim Berti or Funj tribe. In the early 1990s the group had bases in Damazin, Kurmuk, Gisan, and Disa (Young, 1999, p. 322). A faction of the BPLM fell under the influence of the NIF and advocated self-determination for Benishangul as a prelude to union with Sudan. By the mid-1990s much of the infrastructure of Benishangul, including schools and clinics, had been destroyed by an armed group based in Sudan and believed to be the BPLM (Young, 1999, p. 325).

South of Benishangul is the state of Gambella, which has long had close relations with Sudan because its dominant tribes—Nuer and Anuak—are well

represented on both sides of the border. The Nuer elite developed close relations with the Derg and this encouraged the establishment of cooperative relations between the EPRDF and the Anuak-dominated GPLM, which carried on a sporadic guerrilla struggle in the late 1980s from positions along the Sudanese border (Young, 1999, p. 328). As a result of its alliance with the EPRDF the GPLM assumed power at the regional level when the EPRDF took power in Addis Ababa in 1991. In 1994 the GPLM changed its name to the Gambella People’s Liberation Party (GPLP), and in the same year won the regional elections. Relations with the EPRDF then broke down because of allegations of mismanagement and corruption, leading to Addis Ababa instituting direct rule for a time. Behind many of these contests was the struggle between the Anuak and Nuer for political dominance in the region. A critical point of contention was the population of these various groups. In 1994 the EPRDF conducted a national census which concluded that the Nuer constituted the majority in Gambella. The Anuak have never accepted this finding, arguing that many of the Nuer are refugees or migrants from Sudan and should not be considered Ethiopians.

In April 1997 a press release announced the formation of the Ethiopian Democratic Patriotic United Front (EDPUF). This was made up of seven organizations: the Benishangul People’s Liberation Movement (BPLM), the Ethiopian Democratic Motherland Party, the Ethiopian People’s Unifying Organization, the Ethiopian Unity Democratic Movement, the Ethiopian Unity Front (EUF), the Kafegn Patriotic Front, and a faction of the MEDHIN party. Probably only the Benishangul People’s Liberation Movement and Kafegn have proved to be of any significance.

In 1996 the BPLM and Kafegn were involved in the establishment of the EUF. The EUF received Sudanese support and used the BPLM to assist its cross-border activities (Young, 1999, p. 341). The BPLM is a Muslim organization and fitted easily into Turabi’s game plan, while most of the other groups involved in the EDPUF were Amhara and Christian. Little has been heard of the EDPUF since 1998.

The consolidation of NIF power in Khartoum, meanwhile, brought the armed and civilian Sudanese opposition together to form the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 1991 in Asmara. This in turn produced a number of new

groups that operated along the border (Young, 2002, p. 34). The cornerstone of the NDA was the Asmara Declaration of 1995, which committed the signatories to struggle for a united Sudan—in which state and religion would be separated—and to recognize the right of the South to self-determination. This brought the northern opposition into cooperation with the Garang-led SPLM/A's pursuit of a 'New Sudan'. From its inception the NDA was strongly supported by the governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia as a means to reduce the threat posed by Khartoum's Islamist government (Young, 1999, p. 344).

Apart from the SPLM/A, probably the most significant component of the NDA was the Sudan Alliance Forces, led by Brigadier Abdel Aziz Khalid and other officers who had rejected the NIF and as a result were imprisoned and/or forced out of the country (Young, 2003, p. 428). Dr Tasir Ali, a Sudanese political scientist who also held Canadian citizenship, was the deputy leader. Many of the early leaders lived in Cairo, but with the provision of Eritrean support they moved to Asmara. From the beginning this group received considerable political and military backing from Eritrea and Ethiopia and financial assistance from Sudan's opposition diaspora, most of whom worked in the Gulf. The Alliance was viewed favourably by Western governments who saw it as a potential replacement for the Islamist regime in Khartoum. At its peak in the mid-1990s the Alliance had as many as 5,000 fighters from both the North and South of Sudan, including many poor Sudanese peasants working on the agricultural schemes in Eritrea's Gash delta and Ethiopia's Humera. Unlike other components of the NDA, the Alliance fighters were trained in the PFDJ's Sawa military camp and—as witnessed by the author—also had a base in Bahir Dar in northern Ethiopia. With the support of the Eritrean and Ethiopian armies, they captured territory along Sudan's eastern border, notably in the Menza area just north of the Blue Nile River.

The former Umma Party governor of Darfur, Ahmed Dirage, together with the anthropologist Dr Shirif Harari formed another component of the NDA known as the Sudan Democratic Alliance Forces, which was intended to serve in Darfur. However, while it had support among the Darfurian diaspora, like other NDA components its armed group was small and its military activities were largely limited to a series of minor engagements along the Eritrean border in cooperation with more powerful groups.

The Umma Party and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) also formed small armed groups of several hundred men who fought in a few engagements and carried out sabotage attacks on the oil pipeline as part of broader NDA and SPLA efforts. Other NDA components, such as the Legitimate Command, were little more than paper organizations, while the Sudan Communist Party contributed a medical brigade. More significant were the activities of the Beja Congress and the Rashida Free Lions, which are considered at length in another Small Arms Survey working paper (Young, 2007a). Although not always apparent, much of the military activity in eastern Sudan was carried out by the SPLA, or with considerable support from and even the direct involvement of the Eritrean and Ethiopian armies.

While the NDA never proved militarily effective, the massive support it received from Eritrea and Ethiopia and the direct engagement of their armies in the conflict meant that the threat posed by the Eritrean jihad, the BPLM, and the OLF declined precipitously. As a result of this support a cordon sanitaire was effectively created between Ethiopia and Eritrea and much of Islamist-controlled Sudan. Pressure was further reduced on the western borders of these countries by their engagement, together with Uganda, in military campaigns in Equatoria, and the provision of USD 20 million by the US government to what became known as the 'frontline states' (Young, 2005, p. 540). Against this background, there was a very real prospect that the NIF regime would be overthrown. The outbreak of the Ethiopia–Eritrea War in 1998, however, ended this possibility and again altered the configuration of armed groups along the frontier. 📌

VII. Armed groups along the frontier 1998–2000

The outbreak of the Ethiopia–Eritrea War quickly changed relations between Khartoum, Addis Ababa, and Asmara—and by extension their relations with the dissident groups they supported along the frontier. The antagonism between Ethiopia and Eritrea continued after Ethiopia’s military victory in 2000, and the two countries continued to support one another’s dissidents.

With its energies entirely directed towards defeating Eritrea, Addis Ababa was anxious to end its belligerent relationship with Khartoum. Believing that the NDA had largely fallen under the influence of the Eritreans, its various components operating from Ethiopia were expelled and the Bahir Dar base of the Sudan Alliance Forces was closed, leading to its disintegration in Menza. Some of its members walked to Eritrea, others surrendered to the GoS army, some became shifta, and others retreated to Ethiopia to become refugees under the UNHCR—where a handful remain today. The Sudan Alliance Forces continued to play a minor military and political role in the NDA, based in Asmara, until it was officially dissolved and merged with the SPLM/A at a meeting in Khartoum in October 2005.

When Sudan and Ethiopia reconciled, the small military contingents of the Umma Party and DUP were also forced to leave Ethiopia. In 1999 the Umma Party leader, Sadig al-Mahdi, signed the Djibouti Accord with his brother-in-law, Hassan al-Turabi, and his forces left the NDA and returned to Khartoum. While the Umma army did not represent a significant military force, the loss of this major party weakened the NDA politically. Meanwhile, the SPLM/A managed to maintain their core area until the signing of the CPA in 2005—despite the fact that the forces of Malik Agar in South Blue Nile could no longer count on logistical support from the Ethiopian government, and faced increasing pressures from the Sudan Armed Forces (Young, 2004, p. 120).

For its part the NIF was equally anxious to improve relations with Ethiopia, which had posed the biggest external threat to the survival of successive Sudanese governments (Young, 2002, p. 84). In order to win the favour of Addis

Ababa, Khartoum offered oil at concessionary prices, access to Port Sudan after Ethiopia’s loss of the use of Assab and Massawa, and the opportunity to increase trade and investment. These offers were cemented by the construction of the Gederif–Gondar road, linking the two countries (Young, 2002, p. 86). Essentially, the new relationship was based on the NIF’s need for security and Addis Ababa’s desire for economic development. The NIF also stopped or reduced support for anti-EPRDF armed groups operating from its territory, although these were never a major threat to the Ethiopian regime.

Interviews in Sudan with representatives of the OLF and the BPLM, the two largest Ethiopian armed groups, confirm that their organizations were closed after the thaw in relations between Khartoum and Addis Ababa. However, it is not clear that the NIF entirely ended its relations with these dissident groups. In the turbulent Horn, where friends can become enemies and enemies become friends with amazing rapidity, it is not expedient to completely sever relations with the various political and military groups that emerge as circumstances change. Thus, the BPLM and the OLF may still have relations with Khartoum, function politically in the capital, and have skeletal military bases—even if they are not permitted to launch cross-border military operations. In an interview in 2006, OLF leader Dawad Ibsa claimed that he still had an office in Khartoum (*Les Nouvelles d’Addis*, 2006).

In 1998 the EPRDF merged the GPLP and the Gambella People’s Democratic Unity Party to form the joint Anuak–Nuer Gambella People’s Democratic Front (GPDF) (Tadesse, 2007, p. 14). Although organizationally separate from the EPRDF, it is largely controlled by the party. Angry at these developments, dissident Anuak formed the Gambella People’s Democratic Congress, dedicated to ridding Gambella of both highlanders and Nuer. This was, in turn, fiercely resisted by the GPDF (*ibid.*). Both parties, however, suffered from factionalism and have since largely passed from the scene.

The National Congress Party apparently stopped supporting anti-EPRDF groups in 1999, but it helped to establish the Eritrean National Alliance (ENA) in October 2002 as a response to the NDA. The ENA, based in Addis Ababa, also received support from Yemen and Ethiopia. According to the US State Department, there were ten groups in the ENA comprising 3,000 members.⁶ By early 2006, however, the organization had disintegrated. ■

VIII. Armed groups along the frontier 2000–06

The military victory of the EPRDF that ended the Ethiopia–Eritrea War, and its occupation of a swath of Eritrean territory, brought yet another change to the configuration of armed groups in the borderlands between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Asmara replaced Khartoum as the leading supporter of anti-EPRDF armed groups operating along the frontier. The aims of this policy have included: putting pressure on the EPRDF to withdraw its forces from Eritrea; stopping Ethiopian and Sudanese support for Eritrean opposition groups; ending Eritrea’s encirclement by countries in the region determined to undermine the regime; and perpetuating of the idea that the Eritrean People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ)—in particular its highly ambitious leader, President Isiyas Aferworki—could shape the political destiny of the Horn (Young, 2006a, p. 598). As well as supporting Ethiopian dissidents, the PFDJ continues to assist the Sudanese opposition.

Anti-PFDJ armed groups

Sudan, in turn, has assisted anti-PFDJ groups and has been joined by Ethiopia and Yemen, the latter because of its conflict with Eritrea over possession of the Red Sea Hanish Islands. Eritrea rightly accuses the Sana’a Pact states (Ethiopia, Sudan, and Yemen) of forming an anti-Eritrean alliance. There are credible reports that these states established a fund through which Yemen and Sudan each provided USD 1 million and Ethiopia a further USD 200,000 annually to various Eritrean dissident groups operating largely from Sudan, and helped coordinate the groups’ activities. However, it must be stressed that Eritrea’s support of dissident groups in Sudan and Ethiopia has thus far been more active and sustained than the activities of its opponents, even if such support has not proved particularly effective.

Although there are a number of anti-PFDJ groups operating in Sudan, only two are of any military significance: the Eritrean Islamic Reform Front (EIRF),

which is also known as the Eritrean Islamic Reform Movement (EIRM), and the Abdullah Idris faction of the ELF. It is believed that both groups have been supported by the Sudan government. Some of this support might have included the provision of landmines since a number have been detonated in areas in which the EIRF/EIRM has been operating in the past few years.⁷ It is also possible that some of the groups’ weapons have come from defecting Eritrean soldiers crossing the border. The level of military activity along the border, however, has been low. More of Khartoum’s support has been directed towards a number of Eritrean Islamist political organizations that operate in eastern Sudan, in particular the Beni Amar, a group sometimes held to be part of the Beja tribe. By supporting them, Khartoum was attempting to undermine the Beja Congress (Young, 2007a, p. 27).

The EIRF/EIRM claim to have 2,000–3,000 fighters and to maintain an office in Khartoum, but its support in Eritrea appears limited.⁸ Moreover, after the Eastern Front (an amalgamation of the Beja Congress and the Rashida Free Lions) and the Government of Sudan (GoS) signed the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (ESPA) on 14 October 2006, the EIRF/EIRM and the Abdullah Idris faction of the ELF were supposed to be dissolved (Young, 2007). Whether they have been remains to be seen. Curiously, however, the ELF–Revolutionary Council (ELF–RC), which claims to have a military wing, reportedly held a conference in Khartoum immediately after the signing of the ESPA (ELF–RC, 2006). The ELF–RC is also believed to operate out of Addis Ababa and to be led by Woldeyesus Ammar.

Another dissident Eritrean group is the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrea (DMLE), which was established with TPLF support during the 1980s at a time when relations between the TPLF and EPLF were particularly tense (Young, 1996, p. 103). It is known that the DMLE continues to have bases in Tigray, but whether it carries out military operations is not clear—if it does so, they must be very limited. The Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrean Kunama (DMLEK) operates from Ethiopian territory and is credited with carrying out a number of successful military operations in recent years. Its leader, Corneleus, is said to lead about 120 fighters. It is reasonable to assume that Ethiopia is providing arms, training, and logistics for this group, which, like several Eritrean opposition groups, has an office in Addis

Ababa. It was recently reported that a faction had broken away from DMLEK, although there are few details.

Two armed groups that operate within Eritrea are the Marxist Red Sea Afar Liberation Movement, which is active in eastern Eritrea, and another Marxist group, Sagam. Little is known about the latter except that it is led by Twelde Gebre Selassie and operates in the Karen area of Eritrea (Young, 1996). A much smaller group, Segede, is made up of highland Tigrigna-speakers. This and the Eritrean People's Movement (EPM), which may command up to 300 fighters, are supported by the Ethiopian government. The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Eritrea claims to be active politically in the border area—or more plausibly among Eritreans in Ethiopia and Sudan—and to have a military wing, but this cannot be substantiated.

In January 2005, 16 Eritrean opposition parties met in a conference in Khartoum and formed the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA) with Ethiopian support (Plaut, 2006, p. 589). This broad coalition included parties from the 1970s, such as the ELF and ELF-RC, and more recent creations, such as the Ethiopian-aligned Eritrean Revolutionary Democratic Front and the Islamist EIRM. It also includes such OAGs as the DMLEK, the Red Sea Afar Liberation Movement, Sagam, Segede, EPM, and the jihad groups supported by the GoS. In early 2007 it was reported that the EDA had fractured into two components.

Anti-EPRDF armed groups

For its part, Eritrea is believed to be supporting two groups in Tigray, Ethiopia's northernmost state and the heartland of the TPLF, which dominates the EPRDF government. The first group to begin operations was the Tigrayan Alliance for National Democracy (TAND) led by Aregawi Berhe, the first leader of the TPLF who has lived in exile in the Netherlands for more than 20 years. TAND is a small group largely made up of Tigrayans living abroad. Secular in orientation, it appeals to Tigrayan nationalism and the anti-Meles Zenawi sentiments that have grown since the split in the ruling party in 2002 (Tadesse and Young, 2003, p. 430). TAND has little or no military capacity. It is possible that it may be receiving support from Asmara and its members may enter

western Tigray from Sudan. It is largely an organization of the diaspora with a limited support base in Tigray.

TAND in turn has relations with the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Tigray (DMLT), which is assumed to be receiving support from Eritrea. It is led by Fasah Haile Marian, whom is thought to live somewhere in Europe. For a period in early 2005 parts of western Tigray (albeit an area of low population density) were considered a 'no-go area' for the government because the DMLT had planted landmines. In early 2005 there were reports of mines being laid on the Galabat–Humera road, probably by the DMLT. This group is believed to enter Ethiopian territory by crossing the Eritrea–Sudan border and moving south through Sudanese territory and then entering Tigray somewhere around Humera—a major commercial agricultural area. Ethiopian sources acknowledge that some former members of the TPLF have affiliated with the DMLT, but claim that it is not a genuine political organization and is entirely a creation of the Eritrean army.

After the split in the TPLF in 2002 the Tigrayan community experienced considerable divisions and in some cases voiced open opposition. But the dissidents whom Meles dismissed from the government and party did not attempt to launch an armed struggle. To date, they have limited their political activities to producing manifestos and talking about forming a party. As a result, dissent is largely limited to the anger of those in the diaspora and there seems little prospect of this giving rise to committed armed groups opposed to the government in the near future.

South of Tigray, Kefagn carried on a shadowy existence for many years. In 1999 it joined the EUF with two other parties: the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces and the Benishangul People's Democratic Movement. The Kefagn group later became part of the Ethiopian People's Patriotic Front (EPPF).⁹ This armed group, which appeals to Amhara and pan-Ethiopian sentiments, carries out operations in Gondar and in Gojam, the area west of Lake Tana, and claims to be operational in parts of Gambella, which may suggest a link with Tuat Pal (see below). It is believed to be supported by the Eritrean army and supplies are or were funnelled down the Sudanese corridor. The best indication of Eritrean support has been press releases issued in the name of the EPPF from Asmara, reporting armed encounters and claiming various military vic-

tories against the Ethiopian army—although such reports cannot be confirmed. The EPPF is led by Zewdaem Kebede of the International Leadership Commission. In June 2006 the Ethiopian army claimed that it had killed 111 rebels from a group aided by Eritrea—probably the EPPF—in the north Gondar area, although this was denied by the EPPF and Eritrea (AFP, 2006).

The EPPF claims that the Alliance for Freedom and Democracy (AFD), founded on 22 May 2006 in Utrecht, the Netherlands, is its political wing.¹⁰ The AFD is a product of the controversial 2005 national elections in Ethiopia and is made up of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Sidama Liberation Front, and the United Ethiopia Democratic Front.

Elements of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) operated in the area west of Lake Tana for many years, but it is no longer thought to have any military capacity and has become very factionalized. Its current leader, Mersha Yusif, lives in the United States.

The Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM) declined after the onset of the Ethiopia–Eritrea War and the Sudanese–Ethiopian reconciliation, which made operations along the frontier extremely difficult. In January 2005 an agreement was signed between the BPLM and the EPRDF, but a year later it broke down and conflict was resumed. BPLM members interviewed by the author deny operating from bases in Sudan, but they acknowledge receiving logistical support from Eritrea.

Eritrean support has largely concentrated on the OLF, long the biggest armed group opposed to the EPRDF. The OLF is believed to have a core fighting force of 5,000 and the capacity to mobilize as many as 12,000 more (*Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism Report*, 2006, p. 2).¹¹ Formed in 1973, the OLF played a role in overthrowing the Derg and initially joined the Ethiopian government but then fell out with the EPRDF. Because it draws support from Ethiopia's largest ethnic community, its members can be found in many Western countries, most notably Australia, Canada, Germany, and the United States. However, tribal, religious, and ideological differences make the OLF a divided organization. Its present leader, Daud Ibsa Anyana, is usually based in Asmara where the OLF has its headquarters. Although it is the largest rebel group in Ethiopia, the OLF has had few significant military successes.

The end of the Ethiopia–Eritrea War proved a mixed blessing for the OLF. On the one hand, it opened the door to Eritrean support, and on the other, it meant that the Ethiopian army had more resources to direct against it. Moreover, since the events of 11 September 2001, the Ethiopian government has been able to portray the OLF as a terrorist organization and thus conflate its fight against the group with the larger international fight against terrorism. There are at least six Oromo OAGs in Ethiopia, but apart from the OLF none is operating along Sudan's eastern frontier and they are of little military significance. These groups did, however, come together in Asmara in September 2000 to form the United Liberation Forces of Oromiya. However, the organization has thus far proved ineffective. There were reports of OLF attacks on Ethiopian government forces in the areas north of Gambella and east of the Sudanese village of Daga in mid-2006, and it would appear that at least a small contingent of the OLF is able to operate in the Mendi area of western Wallega on a semi-permanent basis. Because of the distances involved, OLF fighters and supplies have been flown from Eritrea to locations in Sudan around Gambella and as far south as Akobo from where they were moved through the lowlands to launch attacks in the Ethiopian state of Oromiya (Young, 2003, p. 428). According to one analyst, OLF incursions in the Gambella area involve an effort to find entry points to the Oromo populated highlands, and to develop alliances with anti-EPRDF dissidents elsewhere in the country (Tadesse, 2007, p. 22).

Armed groups in the Gambella region

In recent years most of the border area surrounding Gambella has been occupied by three particular armed groups: the GoS-aligned South Sudan Defence Force (SSDF)—notably the troops of Brigadier Chayout east of Longochuk, and of Major-General Gordon Kong in the Nasir and Sobat River Corridor area and in Adar; the South Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM) forces of Dr Michael Wal and Brigadier Timothy Taban in the Akobo area; and, moving further south, the Murle militia of Major-General Ismael Konye (Young, 2006b, pp. 20–21). However, as a result of the Juba Declaration of 8 January 2006, SSDF leader Chayout joined the SPLM/A, to be followed by Ismael in

early 2007. The SSLM had been absorbed into the SPLM/A before the Juba Declaration. Gordon Kong remains in the government camp, but his activities have been limited in the past year. The area in which he operates, however, has long been unstable and violent, which can be attributed to a number of causes related to the long civil war in South Sudan. Insecurity was also exacerbated by the Sudan Armed Forces' (SAF) support of the remaining SSDF elements, the failure of the SPLM/A to establish effective systems of local government, and problems encountered in disarming the tribes of eastern Upper Nile.

The clash in Malakal in November 2006 between SSDF components and their former colleagues who had joined the SPLA (as a result of the Juba Declaration) highlighted the capacity of the renewed SPLA. This forced Sudan's defence minister to announce that all SAF-affiliated militias had either to join the SAF or to leave the territory by the end of the year (Young, 2007b, p. 20). An estimated 150 people died in this fighting, which appears to have seriously undermined SAF support for OAGs in the Greater Upper Nile area. This should help to increase security in a traditionally volatile area.

Meanwhile, there are major problems within Gambella, which has five distinctive, albeit overlapping, conflicts or tensions: (a) between the indigenous peoples and settler highlanders, largely Oromos, Amhara, and Tigrayans, who have moved to the area; (b) between the Nuer, the largest tribe, and the Anuak, the second largest tribe; (c) between Nuer clans; (d) resentment by some Nuer who dominated the region under the Derg at what they see as their reduced status under the EPRDF; and (e) anger at the EPRDF by Anuak elements because of their perceived declining status in the state (Young, 1999, p. 339). Detailed explanations of the conflicts cannot be given here, except to say that they largely reflect disputes over resources (principally land and water), access to power in the local administration, and—increasingly—the benefits that may accrue should current efforts to find oil prove successful. None of these conflicts has been restricted to the Ethiopian side of the border. Moreover, weak governments and a proliferation of weapons have encouraged shifta activity on both sides of the frontier.

One of the most significant conflicts to break out in Gambella was led by Tuat Pal Chol, a Nuer and former Central Committee member under the Derg, who attempted to rally opposition, particularly among the state's Nuer people,

to the EPRDF regime through the Gambella People's Liberation Front (Young, 2003, p. 44). Until the end of the Ethiopia–Eritrea War, Tuat Pal had little success, but his prospects improved once Eritrea began providing support to any armed group opposed to the Addis Ababa regime. In 2000 Tuat Pal visited Asmara and was provided with arms and training for his fighters. With this support his group is believed to have captured villages along the border in Gambella for brief periods, presumably from bases in Sudan. The Eritrean link has continued and Tuat Pal was elected to the leadership of the EPPF, which led him to take a number of trips to Europe and the United States in recent years to raise support. Tuat Pal's group is unique in Gambella in that he has aligned with pan-Ethiopian groups (Tadesse, 2007, p. 28).

Although Tuat Pal usually lives in the United States, he travels to Nairobi regularly and has also developed links with the South Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SSLM/A). This is a small Nuer group associated with the SSDF that drew support from the Akobo area where its then leader, Dr Michael Wal Duany, a US-Sudanese professor of political science at Indiana University, lived (Young, 2006b, p. 21). Akobo frequently passed from SSLM to SPLA control and back again.¹² When under the control of the SSLM various schemes were hatched to take forces of the OLF and Tuat Pal from bases in Eritrea to Akobo, from where they infiltrated into Gambella. Witnesses, some of whom were in Akobo at the time, reported that more than 700 OLF fighters flew to the town from Eritrea in mid-2002 and subsequently travelled through Gambella to western Wellaga, where it is believed they were killed, captured by the Ethiopian army, or forced to flee back to Sudan (Young, 2003, p. 428).

It is believed that in return for facilitating these arrangements the SSLM received weapons and supplies from Tuat Pal, who had acquired them from Eritrea. According to other reports, between December 2001 and mid-2003 Eritrea funnelled at least seven OLF battalions, each made up of 150–200 fighters, into the Oromo-populated state of Wallega in western Ethiopia, most of them through Gambella. Eritrea reportedly channelled other OLF troops more directly into areas just north of Gambella and south of the Benishangul capital, Assossa. Ethiopian government sources claim that all these units were wiped out, but there is probably a continuing low-level OLF presence in Wallega. After the signing of the 2005 CPA, however, the SSLM was absorbed into the SPLM/A,

which has controlled Akobo since then. While SPLM/A authority in the area is less than complete, this centre can no longer be used easily as an entry point for Ethiopian dissidents.

Anuak opposition and persecution

Problems remain in Gambella, however, particularly among the Anuak who fear that their position in the state and access to resources are being challenged both by highlanders and by the Nuer—who are moving to an area they consider their homeland. In response, elements among Anuak ranks have continued to challenge EPRDF rule. In 2002 conflict erupted between Anuak and Nuer during the planning of the restructuring of the Gambella region into three ethnically designated zones (Anywaa, Nuer, and Majanger) and one inter-ethnic zone (Gambella). The conflict spread throughout the region and the refugee camps, and the national government declared a state of emergency. Many Anuak lost their positions in the civil service reform, giving the impression that they were further losing power, while highland professionals took positions within the regional government. The recent round of fighting began on 13 December 2003 with an attack on the Administration of Refugee Returnee Affairs, an affiliate of the Ethiopian security services, in which eight civilians were killed. Although never proven, it was widely believed that the attack was carried out by dissident Anuaks (Genocide Watch and Survivors' Rights International, 2004).

This event precipitated attacks by Gambella highlanders, reportedly supported by the national army, against civilian Anuak. According to human rights organizations, an estimated 450 civilians were killed between 13 and 16 December 2003 in a pogrom-like period of violence (Genocide Watch and Survivors' Rights International, 2004). While there is little doubt that the national army was involved, some Ethiopians insist that these were rogue elements that did not represent the army leadership, and note that several soldiers were court marshalled in late 2006 and are currently serving prison terms for their involvement in the attack. Following the violence, many Anuak—including the president of Gambella State, Okello Akuai—fled Gambella for the Pochalla area in Sudan's eastern Upper Nile, where the Anuak's king resides.

The author witnessed and interviewed the fleeing Anuak in Pochalla while working as a monitor with the Civilian Protection Monitoring Team (CPMT). He also met with SPLM/A officials in the area at this time who reported that Ethiopian army officials repeatedly accused an armed Anuak group of carrying out operations in Gambella from bases in the Pochalla area, and that they threatened to cross the border to attack the bases. Local SPLM/A officials denied these allegations and said that Ethiopian Military Intelligence in Gambella had manufactured the claim to cover up its own incompetence and involvement in corruption. The Anuak interviewed accused the EPRDF of genocide.

It was in the wake of these events that the Gambella People's Liberation Movement/Front (GPLM/F) was resurrected on 30 October 2005 as an armed group fighting the EPRDF (GPLM/F, 2005). According to the GPLM/F's first press release, 'the major objective is to fight for self-determination' for Gambella. It further claimed that the people of Gambella had been systematically attacked since December 2003 'purely for the government of Ethiopia to settle their own tribes in the region and use the available natural resources' (GPLM/F, 2005). The GPLM/F is led by Anuak intellectuals in the diaspora from where it receives most of its funds. Operationally, it is based in Pochalla and Nairobi (Tadesse, 2007, p. 22).

Army and police authorities in Ethiopia have regularly claimed that the SPLM/A Anuak administration in Pochalla are supplying arms and training to Gambellan Anuak dissidents (Tadesse, 2007, p. 20). However, it seems unlikely that the senior SPLM/A leadership would permit dissident groups to carry out attacks on Ethiopian government installations from its territory. It is possible that lower-ranking Anuak commanders in the SPLA have had more loyalty to their tribal members, particularly if they believed they were being persecuted by the Ethiopian regime, than to their movement's leadership.

In October 2005 an armed Anuak group (probably the GPLM/F) carried out a series of attacks in Gambella and it was reported that 20–30 military personnel were killed, together with a number of civilians. The same group attacked a prison in Gambella town on 30 October 2005, freed inmates, and killed the police commissioner. In a GPLM/F press release issued on 14 January 2006 the group claimed to have killed 2,000 EPRDF soldiers during the previous five days (GPLM/F, 2006), but this seems highly unlikely.

Yet another group, the Gambella People's Democratic Unity Party, also aims to overthrow the current regime in Addis Ababa.¹³ It is reputedly led by Ogang Okuma and based in North America and Kenya. Nothing more is known about it.

Relations between the Anuak zone authorities and their counterparts in Sudan have improved since October 2006. A series of cross-border meetings have produced agreements on establishing SPLM/A posts in the border towns. There was also agreement on freedom of movement, reintegration of dissident Anuak youth, and the release of some political prisoners. This has been precipitated by a softer approach by the government in Ethiopia, which has included offering amnesty to returnees, a major initiative by Anywaa community leaders to recall their youth, some release of political detainees from the Gambella prison, increased inter-governmental discussions, and a disarmament process on the Sudan side that has reduced space for armed civilians and groups to operate. Nonetheless, according to one observer, this process remains fragile and there is a pressing need to focus on its consolidation.

Many of the anti-EPRDF groups operating along the frontier have received logistical support from Asmara and in some cases had their forces trained in Eritrea. They are also broadly linked under an umbrella organization—the Ethiopian Unity Party, led by Dr Tadesse Juma, which has its headquarters in Asmara.

Largely in response to growing Ethiopian concerns about the porous Sudan–Eritrea border, the Sudanese and Ethiopian governments came together at a conference in Gondar on 28 November 2005 and agreed to cooperate in maintaining peace and security along their shared frontier (*Ethiopian Herald*, 2005).

Armed tribes along the Ethiopia–Sudan border

In the south-eastern extremes of Upper Nile and in easternmost Equatoria are a host of tribes that live on both sides of the Ethiopia–Sudan border. They are largely pastoralist and often in conflict with their neighbours, but only in the case of the Murle component of the SSDF are any of them known to have an organized politico-military element. That said, armed Murle groups have raided and been raided by their neighbours for more than 150 years (Gatwoth,

1988, p. 41). Particularly contentious has been the trade in children between these tribes, which apparently began when Bor Dinka children born outside accepted relationships were traded to the Murle. This set off a chain reaction in which other tribes were raided for their children, who were then sold to the Murle (*ibid.*).

While smaller in number than the neighbouring Dinka and Nuer tribes, the Murle tend to dominate in conflicts with competitors (Gatwoth, 1988). Although the Murle leader, Ismael Konye, has apparently joined the SPLM/A, his SAF-established militia and tribesmen have not been fully disarmed. Moreover, as of May 2007, there have been allegations—which Ismael denies—of continuing Murle attacks on disarmed Anuak, eastern Nuer, Bor Dinka, and other tribes residing on the Ethiopian side of the border. Armed Murle have also been raiding cattle in Gambella and killing civilians. On 17 January 2007 a German researcher visiting the area reported that three civilians had been killed and six wounded and as many as 2,500 cattle stolen in a Murle raid on Gajaak Nuer villages in the Jor woreda (district), along the Sudanese border. The same researcher listed a number of similar attacks over the following months, although there is no indication that these were politically motivated.

SAF-supported militias

Outside the ranks of the rump SSDF, the SAF supports a number of armed militias that operate in the frontier areas of eastern Upper Nile and Blue Nile. Little is known about these groups. Significantly, the SAF has largely depended on non-indigenous peoples to pursue its security agenda. These include the Rufaa Arabs, who are generally wealthy camel herders who take their animals from the Wad Medani area southwards as far as the Blue Nile River near the Ethiopian border. They are known to be organized by the government as militias in the Popular Defence Force (PDF),¹⁴ to be well-armed, and to have fought numerous times against SPLA forces in the Blue Nile area before the signing of the CPA.¹⁵ They have not fought south of the river in recent years because the area is under SPLA control and they have been refused entry.

The SAF has also developed and supported various militias that originate from western Sudan and West Africa. The Umbero, a pastoralist subsection of

the Fulani, have traditionally moved in an arc from Unity State to Upper Nile. As a result of conflict with the SPLM/A, however, many have shifted further east along the Sudan–Ethiopia border from Galabat/Metema in the north to well south of the Blue Nile River. The armed Umbero are believed to be affiliated with the PDF. In May 2006, a representative of the northern wing in Gederif told the author that his group was not armed, but acknowledged that the Umbero further south were organized in SAF-supported militias and repeatedly fought with the SPLA before the signing of the CPA.¹⁶

Various Falata militias are believed to operate under the PDF and to have had frequent armed encounters with the SPLA before the CPA.¹⁷ Elements of the Falata have also been drafted into the security services in Damazin and other GoS centres, causing tension with the local indigenous people. Most of the Falata are from the Hawsa tribe (originally from Nigeria) and, although they came to the area as pastoralists, the majority are now either farm workers or own land in the area from Wad Medani to southern Blue Nile. They are still treated as foreigners by the indigenous people despite having become well established.

The SAF also supports PDF branches in many centres in eastern Sudan along the borders with Eritrea and Ethiopia. The SAF claims that the PDF is involved in development efforts, but its members are issued with weapons, given military training, imbued with Islamist ideology, and have been used extensively in military operations in the past. Under the CPA, the SAF is supposed to be disarming this group in South Sudan, but without serious research it is impossible to determine whether these efforts are just a public relations exercise or whether they are sincere. PDF Captain Sayid Mahdi told the author that the SAF was disarming its members in northern Upper Nile, but he acknowledged that the army had previously provided the Falata and other nomadic tribes in the area with weapons, and that they would be very difficult to disarm. Local government officials expressed considerable doubts about claims that the PDF has been fully disarmed.

In addition, the National Islamic Front/National Congress Party (NIF/NCP) encouraged the development of a host of Islamist NGOs that have concentrated their efforts in the south and along Sudan's eastern frontier. As well as focusing on development, these groups, in particular the Islamic Dawa, are

known to be closely linked to the NCP's efforts at Islamist transformation, and to have supported opponents of the SPLM/A and the NDA—although they are not believed to have their own armed components (de Waal, 1995, p. 162).

Finally, as well as supporting Eritrean jihad groups in north-eastern Sudan, the SAF established and assisted a number of local militias with the aim of challenging Eastern Front dominance in the area. Notable here are the militia of Ali Bitai, a traditional leader from the religious centre of Hamishkoreb near the Eritrean border, and that of Nazir Tirik Sayed of the Hadendawa section of the Beja (Young, 2007a, p. 25). Each militia is believed to number a few hundred men and to be provided with small arms by the SAF. They have played a role in defending the oil pipeline that passes through their territory en route to Port Sudan, and in patrolling areas along the Eritrean border, but they have not engaged in any serious fighting. They were officially dissolved as a result of the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement in 2006.¹⁸ This agreement also brought about the dissolution of the Eastern Front as a military organization, and the GoS promised to end support for Eritrean dissidents. However, it will take time to conclude whether or not the SAF has ended its relations with the Eritrean opposition and stopped supporting the eastern Sudanese militias. ☐

IX. Small arms along the Sudan–Ethiopia frontier

Information on the armed groups along the frontier is at best uneven, but evidence of movements of small arms, other than those supplied by regional governments, is even more fragmentary. The area's isolation from state capitals in Khartoum and Addis Ababa, the large number of pastoralist communities in the borderlands, the strong sense of marginalization felt by local people, and the willingness of governments in the region to support each others' dissidents mean that this area has long had a ready supply of weapons, even if their origins are not easily determined.

Most of the armed groups along the frontier make some pretence of having political objectives and, on this basis, have gained the support of state authorities in Addis Ababa, Asmara, or Khartoum. Their benefactors are the principal sources of their weapons. In particular, a major source of small arms in the eastern Horn, confirmed by Ethiopian government sources, is the EPRDF army, which supplies both small and heavy weapons to a number of warlords in Somalia, some of which find their way to the market and then back to Ethiopia and points further west. In addition, there are various reports of national army soldiers selling their weapons in Gambella. Meanwhile, brokers in Addis Ababa assured the author in late 2006 that small arms were readily available in the capital and that the traders were invariably Somali. A number of sources in Khartoum stated that there was a market in small arms in the Galabat–Metema area with Sudanese shifta bartering sorghum in exchange for weapons from Ethiopia. The author was able to refute these reports, however. According to an Ethiopian agricultural inspector in Metema, sorghum is exported from Ethiopia to Sudan rather than the other way around and, apart from oil, Sudan does not export any products to Ethiopia in that area. As a result, there could therefore be no basis for the suggested bartering. Moreover, a police inspector in Galabat was not aware of any weapons crossing the border in that region. The only security problem in recent months had been night-time attacks by Ethiopian shifta who recrossed the border before daylight.

Weldekidan Hagos reports that during a two-week visit to Gambella in November 2005 he was repeatedly told that many of the weapons in the hands of the Anuak and Nuer came from the SPLM/A in Sudan. The SPLM/A seeks to use weapon distribution as a means to influence various factions involved in the multitude of conflicts in the region (Hagos, 2005, p. 10). He concludes that the increasing availability of weapons is indicated by the growing sophistication of small arms now carried by indigenous tribes. Hagos also suggests that the loosening of Ethiopian army control along the Gambella border area is leading to a free flow of weapons, some of which are falling into the hands of criminal elements. In addition, there is little doubt that both the Anuak and the Nuer can expect to acquire small arms from their clan cohorts on the Sudanese side of the border. However, according to one observer, there are fewer weapons in circulation since the SPLA disarmed communities in Pochalla, Pagak (and across the border in Lare and Jikawo Gambella), and the two Akobos on the Sudan–Ethiopia border.

South of Gambella the various pastoralist tribes along the frontier are well armed. In these parts of the country where the authorities—be they the governments of Ethiopia and Sudan or the SPLM/A—have very limited control, the pastoralists use weapons for tribal fights, cattle rustling, and self-defence. In recent years the Ethiopian government has made a concerted but unsuccessful effort to disarm these tribes. In the far south, the Yangatum (who are closely related to the Kenyan Turkana and the Sudanese Taposa) have long been involved in a triangular conflict over resources. It is believed that a major source for their arms is Somali traders.

Lastly, there are numerous reports of a large weapons market in Tambool in the Butana area of eastern Sudan. Various smuggled goods are sold, including small arms from throughout the region, and in particular from the Red Sea area. The Rashida reportedly trade heavily in this market, which is largely controlled by the Shukryia. The scale of the trade is such that many believe the GoS must be aware of it, and that elements of the GoS are probably involved. ▣

X. The future of armed groups along the Sudan–Ethiopia frontier

Unless the conditions of marginalization, isolation, limited development, lack of legitimacy of state authorities, limited state control in frontier areas, and tense relations between neighbouring states are resolved—and such a resolution is unlikely—there is little reason to expect increased security or a marked decline in armed groups and a decrease in the supply of weapons. There is also little indication that the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea will be resolved in the near future. Current expectations are for the conflict to continue, as well as the present tit-for-tat assistance of opposing countries' armed dissidents. The enormous level of support provided by the Ethiopian army to the Baidoa-based transitional Somali government, and Eritrea's military assistance to the Union of Islamic Courts in Mogadishu during the war of late 2006 and early 2007, are only the latest manifestations of how the countries use and encourage regional conflicts in order to advance their own interests.

There nevertheless appears to be a decline in military activity along Sudan's border with Eritrea and Ethiopia, even while tensions have increased in other ways. The author spent some time in the Galabat–Metema area in mid-2002. At that time there was a major army presence in the Doka–Galabat vicinity, but the author was told that this did not reflect Ethiopia–Sudan relations, which were good. Instead, the military was apparently there to intercept Ethiopian dissident forces being funnelled along this corridor from Eritrea. On a visit to the same area at the end of 2005 the author did not see a single GoS uniformed soldier and spent the day freely in Galabat, unlike his earlier visit when he was not allowed to stay in the town and was delivered by GoS officials to the Ethiopian immigration authorities in Metema. Ethiopia's state minister of foreign affairs, Dr Takada Alemu, confirmed to the author in January 2006 that there had been a marked decline in Eritrean incursions along the country's western border. The best explanation for this is that the improvement in Sudan–Ethiopia relations and the growing capacity of the SPLM/A to police its borders

has made it more difficult for dissidents to operate in these areas and for Eritrea to supply them. Against this background, Asmara developed close relations with the Mogadishu Union of Islamic Courts while the Union was based in Eritrea. Until the war resumed in 2006, this relationship enabled Eritrea to supply anti-EPRDF armed groups, and in particular the OLF and the ONLF, operating from bases in Somalia.

In the mid-1990s, a border dispute between Sudan and Ethiopia in the same Galabat–Metema area resulted in as many as 500 soldiers (mostly Sudanese) being killed (Young, 1999, p. 329). Improved relations between the two countries, however, have led to them agreeing to a complete demarcation of the border. Government authorities in Khartoum and Addis Ababa regularly report that the problems of the past are being amicably resolved. However, neither the landowners in Gederif, nor the head of the area's Farmers' Association (an NCP-controlled organization) agree. The latter complains bitterly of the loss of land to what he calls Ethiopian colonizers. In response to the same concerns a previously unknown group, the Fashaqah Lands Liberation Organization, issued a press release in early 2006 calling for a struggle to retake lost Sudanese land (*Sudan Tribune*, 2006). Reports of an armed group emerging in this context cannot be dismissed, however unlikely it may be.

Apart from the real prospect that the CPA will break down before the end of its projected six-year duration, the biggest threats to the security of Sudan's eastern frontier are likely to be the confrontation between Eritrea and Ethiopia and the continuing political crisis in Addis Ababa. The regime of Meles Zenawi was not seriously threatened by the opposition-led strikes and demonstrations that afflicted the capital and many parts of the Amhara and Oromo states in the second half of 2005, following the contested national election. However, the regime gave no indication of any willingness to make the difficult changes needed to resolve the crisis or to achieve legitimacy. Problems of EPRDF authority are therefore likely to continue.

Reports of Ethiopian soldiers selling weapons, Military Intelligence corruption in the border areas, and increasing loss of control are also likely to persist. In the absence of a strong administration, the arms-carrying, pastoralist peoples who inhabit Sudan's eastern frontier, particularly in South Sudan, may well become caught up in violent conflicts. The split in the TPLF component

of the EPRDF leadership in 2002, together with the opposition victories in the 2005 election, will encourage opponents of the regime—whether in Asmara or among the many dissident groups—to attempt to increase military pressure. This will inevitably affect security on the Sudanese side of the frontier. Counterpoising this, Ethiopia’s quick victory in January 2007 over the Eritrean-supported troops of the Mogadishu Union of Islamic Courts suggests that its armed forces are not as weak as some of its critics claim. It remains to be seen, however, whether this victory will set the stage for a longer and more debilitating guerrilla struggle, as appears may be the case. Although evidence is not currently available, it can reasonably be assumed that the Ethiopian army used the opportunity of its war with the Union of Islamic Courts to attempt to eliminate the camps of dissident Ethiopian armed groups in Somalia and to disrupt their supply lines to Eritrea, but it would appear that they have not been entirely effective. Thus the Somali War, which was sometimes believed to serve as a proxy conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia, has important implications for security on Sudan’s eastern frontier. The recent signing of the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement suggested a thaw in relations between Asmara and Khartoum, but Ethiopia’s victories make it clear that the EPRDF is the dominant military power in the Horn and this may slow down the rapprochement.

A joint Sudan–Ethiopia commission was formed in mid-January 2007 after Addis Ababa alleged that elements of an undetermined rebel group had reached the Bassinda, Bassalam, and Wad Elhillo areas between Gederef and Kassala. The investigation determined that rebels had been in these areas, but had then withdrawn to Eritrea (*Sudan Tribune*, 2007). It is believed that, during the course of the investigation and other joint meetings, the Ethiopian government told the GoS that it would hold Khartoum responsible for any Eritrean-supported dissidents who entered Ethiopian territory from Sudan.

The current opposition to the EPRDF, inspired by the contested election of 2005, comes largely from two sources: the Coalition for Unity and Democracy, which draws its support from the Amhara; and the OLF, which attracts the Oromo. Both are now members of the Alliance for Freedom and Democracy. Their unity and popular support, along with the backing of their military wing (the EPPF), could make these groups a genuine threat to the EPRDF. They could also prove disruptive to people living along the Ethiopia–Sudan frontier,

although this has not happened to date. The Ethiopian regime has jailed many of the leaders of the political opposition, but the ongoing armed opposition does not currently pose a serious threat.

Hindered in its access to Somali territory as a result of the recent war,¹⁹ the OLF may renew its efforts—with Eritrean support—to enter Ethiopia from Kenya and from Sudan’s eastern frontier. Although not a threat of the same magnitude, it is safe to predict that Amhara rebels will continue their activities in the sparsely populated and lawless lands west of Lake Tana, and the Benishangul and Gambella People’s Liberation Movements will continue to find fertile ground for their attacks on Sudan’s eastern frontier, even without the support of the GoS and SPLM/A. 🗨

XI. Conclusions

This outline of armed groups along Sudan's frontiers with Ethiopia and Eritrea is clearly inadequate in its understanding of their leadership, ideology, numbers, discipline, command and control, morale, capacity, and areas of operation. In the absence of such detailed information this study has largely been descriptive and has given considerable attention to the relationship of these armed groups with the states of the region and with other armed groups. Even here, however, there are major gaps in knowledge. A number of armed groups operating in the frontier area may not even have been identified in this paper. These borderlands also have a long history of *shifita* activity, of *shifita* groups taking on a political form, of politically motivated armed groups pursuing criminal activities, and of some of these groups eventually becoming entirely criminal organizations. These changes are ongoing and hence information must be regularly updated.

To some extent, the movement of small arms in the frontier area is better understood because most of the weapons originate from the governments of Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. The weapons go directly to groups that are aligned with these governments in a number of ways: through soldiers of their national armies selling their weapons to the armed groups; through the armed groups stealing them or taking them in raids; or through weapons being supplied by governments to other sources and ultimately finding their way into the hands of the rebels on the frontier. Little is known, however, about the kinds of weapons used, their numbers, the means of supply, the availability of ammunition, and other such information. Details of the supply of small arms by non-government sources to groups on the frontier are even less well known.

In sum, the signing of the peace agreement between the Eastern Front and the GoS on 14 October 2007 should lead to a reduction, if not the elimination, of OAGs along Sudan's border with Eritrea. As noted above, though, this agreement is largely a product of Khartoum and Asmara's current interest in improving relations and hence is subject to ongoing changes in perceptions in the two

capitals. It must also be viewed against a history of contentious and rapidly changing relations between the states.

Moving south, the divisions inside the ruling party of Ethiopia, which has its core in Tigray, has opened the door to dissent and also to the prospect that Eritrea might use the new environment to build up armed groups. So far, however, this has not happened in any significant way. Groups that have operated in western Tigray do not have any significant basis of support, but that does not discount the threat they may pose to human security. Moreover, Eritrea can be expected to continue its efforts to destabilize Tigray.

The lands west of Lake Tana present a much more complex picture. Traditionally, this has been an unstable area with a history of *shifita* entering the political realm and those in the political realm becoming *shifita*. This pattern appears to be continuing, but the crisis in Ethiopia that emerged in the wake of the contested national election of 2005 set the stage for a renewal of dissident political and military activities by Amhara groups. To date, these are limited and there is little evidence that they have served to destabilize the border area. However, given Eritrean support for dissidents this region is unlikely to become stable in the near future. Conflicts that are developing as a result of contested borders are a significant threat. Fashagar is a flash point and it is believed that Menza, an area north of the Blue Nile, may also be contentious. While local elements carry out isolated attacks, the governments in Addis Ababa and Khartoum have consistently sought to dampen tensions and maintain positive bilateral relations.

The borderlands of Benishangul–Blue Nile are also an area of unresolved tensions. Both the OLF and the BPLM have operated in this area. The BPLM still has supporters because of the continuing dissatisfaction in Benishangul, but there is currently no evidence that the GoS has resumed its support for the movement, which has not operated as an armed group for some years. It is reported that the BPLM has buried its weapons and, should the right circumstances emerge, it could resume fighting, but this is only hearsay.

The borderlands between Gambella and eastern Upper Nile are the most volatile. With a multi-layered conflict under way, Anuak dissent has been the most destabilizing factor and, in the past four years, Gambella has been under virtual occupation by the Ethiopian army and subject to security shutdowns

and armed convoys. A prominent foreign academic doing research in the province claims that the national army serves largely as the bulwark for the highland population that has increasingly moved into the region. By early 2007 security conditions had improved and many of the Anuak refugees who fled to the Pochalla area of Sudan were returning, but the key issues that stimulated the conflict have not been resolved and the situation remains highly unstable. Again, Eritrean support for armed groups in Gambella, notably assistance to Tuat Pal, adds to the instability. This area is likely to remain highly contentious in the future because it has become the focus of oil explorations by China and Malaysia.

Further south, the border area problems are less intense, more localized, and, because of the distances involved, less subject to Eritrean involvement. Problems in this area emanate largely from tribal conflicts over resource access and they involve a number of groups, in particular the Murle, Yangagum, Taposa, and tribes further west—including the Karamojong cluster. The defection of the Murle leadership to the SPLA in early 2007, and the start of a disarmament campaign, may have a positive impact in the long term, but a history of raiding and the widespread availability of small arms suggest that this area is likely to be unstable for many years to come.

There are a range of explanations for the emergence of armed groups and the availability of small arms along Sudan's eastern frontier: marginalization of the communities, inequitable distribution of resources, lack of infrastructure, the failure of governments to exert their authority, ethnic or religious persecution, the suitability of such areas for launching armed struggles against governments in Khartoum, Asmara, and Addis Ababa, or simply the opportunity afforded by a weak government presence to pursue criminal activities. In addition, as this study demonstrates, successive governments in Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia have used these armed groups to pursue their narrow interests. The latest example is the January 2007 war in Somalia, even if it is too recent to fully understand all its implications for security in the wider region. Sudanese government support for the Islamic Courts in the face of fierce Ethiopian opposition led many in Ethiopia to conclude that the NCP still retained Islamist ambitions in the Horn and that Ethiopia should renew its vigilance, particularly in the border areas.

The possible collapse of the CPA and the unresolved conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia pose the biggest continuing threats to regional security. As is made clear above, Sudan is the unwelcome host to largely Eritrean-supported Ethiopian dissidents. During the course of the recent war in Somalia, the Ethiopians tried to destroy the bases of the Eritrean-supported military and political organizations in this country, which may lead Asmara to focus efforts on activating anti-EPRDF dissidents along Sudan's eastern frontier. However, while there are numerous conflicts in Ethiopia along the southern reaches of Sudan's eastern frontier, increasing SPLM/A control means that the Eritrean focus is largely restricted to north-western Ethiopia.

The existence of armed groups and the free flow of weapons are unlikely to diminish until the crises of the states in the region are resolved, which is also unlikely to happen any time soon. Medhane Tadesse's conclusion with respect to cross-border conflict in Gambella largely applies to the rest of the frontier: 'Although it is possible to manage the conflict at the local and national levels, its resolution in a sustainable manner has to await the establishment of a workable and robust peace and security architecture in the region' (Tadesse, 2007, p. 24). 📄

Endnotes

- 1 The term 'Other Armed Group' arises from the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which stipulates that only the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) would be allowed to persist in South Sudan after the agreement's adoption. All other armed groups were therefore mandated to demobilize or be absorbed into either the SPLA or the SAF. Despite this requirement, many armed groups remain in the region two years after the signing of the CPA.
- 2 See, for example, *Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism Report* (2006).
- 3 Previous HSBA publications can be downloaded from <<http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sudan>>.
- 4 Interview with a security analyst, Addis Ababa, 15 February 2007.
- 5 Interview with a security analyst, Addis Ababa, 15 March 2007.
- 6 See <<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Eritrea.pdf>>.
- 7 See the CMPT reports at <<http://www.cpmtsudan.org>>.
- 8 Interview with a security analyst, Addis Ababa, 15 March 2007.
- 9 See the official website of the EPPF at <<http://www.eppf.net>>.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 The discussion of the OLF that follows relies primarily on *Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism Report* (2006).
- 12 See <<http://www.cpmtsudan.org>>.
- 13 See <<http://www.gambelatoday.com>>.
- 14 A forthcoming HSBA Working Paper will examine the history and activity of the PDF in more detail.
- 15 See <<http://www.cpmtsudan.org>>.
- 16 Interview with a representative of the northern wing of the Umbero, 16 May 2006, Gederif.
- 17 See <<http://www.cpmtsudan.org>>.
- 18 Article 24, *Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement* (Eastern Front and the Government of Sudan, 2006).
- 19 See the OLF press release of 20 January 2007 in which the OLF alleged that the Ethiopian army was committing genocide against Oromo refugees in Somalia.

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