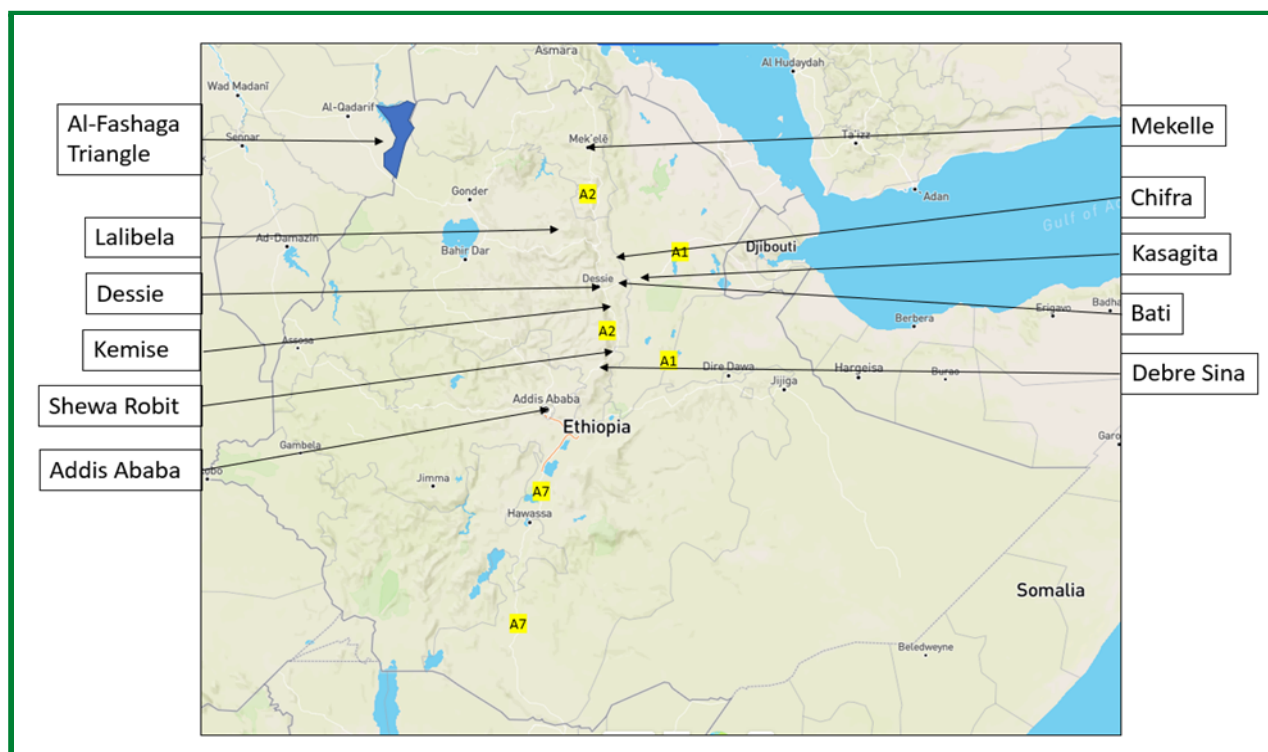


Ethiopia

Flash Analysis and Prediction
06 December 2021



The ENDF has stalled the TDF/ OLA advance towards Addis following effective defence at Debre Sine and ENDF's control of the A1 supply lines. Meanwhile the government has stepped up its media counter offensive, increasing reputational risk to organisations in-country.



Map 1: Ethiopia

Summary

- Communications Minister and government spokesperson Legesse Tulu claimed on 01 December, that the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) had recaptured Shewa Robit
- According to the UN's humanitarian agency OCHA, the fighting has already damaged more than 500 health facilities in Amhara alone.
- There have also been clashes between the ENDF and Sudanese troops in the disputed al-Fashaga triangle.
- The government has stepped up its media counter offensive in an attempt to silence critical voices.
- The ENDF have now retaken **Lalibela**. This suggests that the ENDF hopes to push northeast and cut off those encircling Debre Sina.
- It is **LIKELY** that the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) / Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) advance towards Addis was stalled at Debre Sina due to both the geography and also the possible provision of armaments by the UAE.

- Targeted drone strikes are becoming an important part of the government's defensive campaign. This increases the risk to civilians and civilian objects in opposition-controlled areas.
- The continued conflict is **LIKELY** to have a significant impact on humanitarian access in areas close to or on the TPLF/OLA side of the front lines in the weeks ahead.
- The Ethiopian government campaign against critical media suggests that credible information will become harder to obtain and also to evaluate.
- There are significant reputational risks inside Ethiopia for organisations accepting money from foreign government bodies that have been critical of Abiy's administration.



Analysis

Conflict

Following Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's 22 November declaration that he had gone to serve on the front lines (Abiy is a former army lieutenant-colonel) in the northeastern Afar region, the Ethiopian government claimed on 24 November to have "launched a massive offensive today". Abiy then claimed on 25 November that the ENDF had secured control of Kassagita and planned to recapture Chifra in Afar region the following day. The ENDF actually claimed to have taken Chifra, a key town on one of the more minor routes linking Amhara with Djibouti, on 28 November. Meanwhile, Communications Minister and government spokesman Legesse Tulu claimed on 01 December, that the ENDF had recaptured **Shewa Robit and several smaller towns** in the same area, around 220 kilometres from Addis Ababa by road. Despite this, there are continued reports of fighting around Debre Sina, less than 200 kilometres by road from Addis. The ENDF have also reported that they recaptured **Lalibela** (to the north of Dessie, and a world heritage site which the TDF captured in August 2020) on 02 December). The lack of TPLF statements on the situation on the frontline lends some credibility to the ENDF's claims of advances.

Government officials had earlier claimed to have killed "six top [TPLF] commanders in a special operation on the Bati [Afar] front" and another six "in Kemisie " in Amhara Region. A subsequent statement by Legesse Tulu highlighted the use of "technology" to "greatly minimise human and material losses" in such operations – a **LIKELY** allusion to the accelerating use of armed drones (see **Background Brief: Drones, page 7**). Further evidence of the UAE's support for the ENDF's Chinese-manufactured drones **also continues to emerge** although it should be noted that some of this may be 'circular reporting', rehashing evidence previously posted on less mainstream sites.

According to the UN's **humanitarian agency OCHA**, the fighting has already damaged more than 500 health facilities in Amhara alone. Indeed, credible reports of ENDF airstrikes against hospitals and other medical facilities well behind the front lines, including in Tigray's capital Mekelle, continue to surface although government officials deny this.

There have also been clashes between the ENDF and Sudanese troops in the disputed al-Fashaga triangle. The clashes erupted on 27 November when the ENDF advanced some 70km into Sudanese-held territory, east of the Nourain Lake, with the Sudanese media reporting that 21 of its soldiers were killed. A "large number" of Ethiopian troops were also reportedly killed in the fighting although the ENDF has denied any involvement, instead suggesting that its troops targeted a large "group of insurgents, bandits and terrorists" trying to enter Ethiopia from Sudan. Sudanese military ruler, Lt Gen Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, subsequently visited the area, saying that his country will not "cede an inch" of its territory and there were further clashes on 30 November, with Sudanese forces firing rockets into Ethiopia targeting retreating ENDF troops.

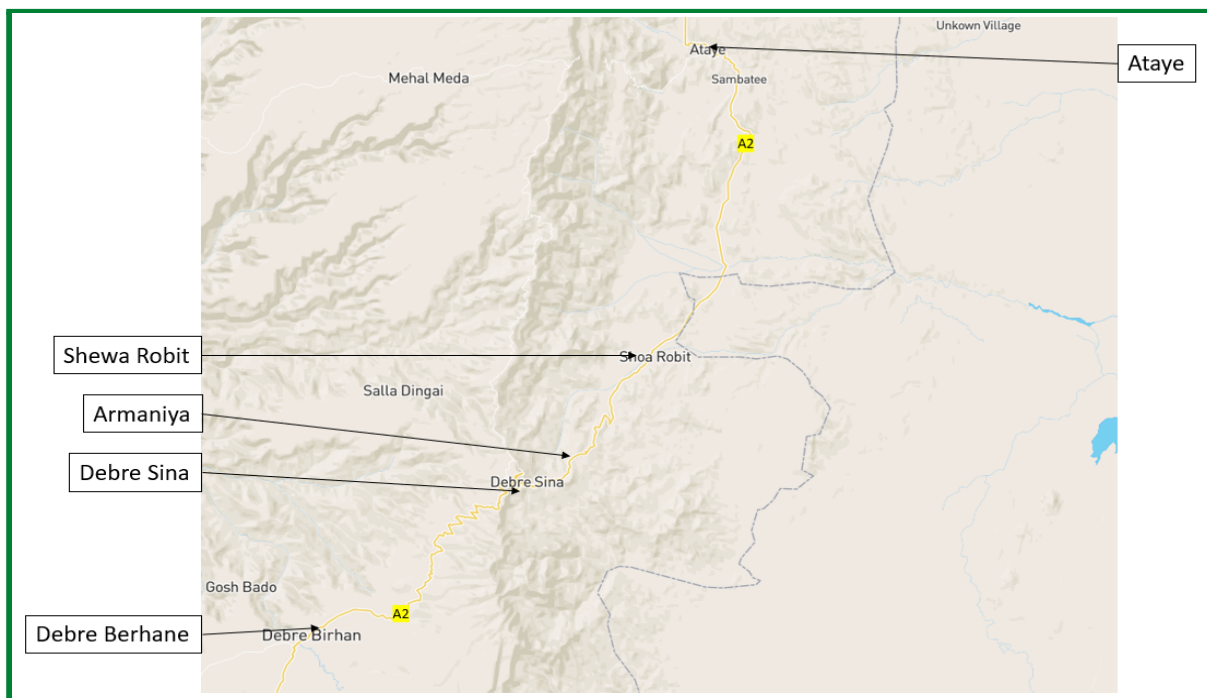
Media/ Diplomatic

The government has also stepped up its media counter offensive in an attempt to silence critical voices. Two weeks ago, state-controlled media alleged a plot by Western countries to persuade Ethiopian leaders to flee the country and officials have repeatedly accused the UN, US and other Western countries of "meddling" in Ethiopia's internal affairs as fighting has edged closer to Addis Ababa. Indeed, following the move by the Ethiopian government to **expel four Irish diplomats** from the country last week, state-controlled media claimed that "thousands" subsequently protested outside Western embassies in Addis against "foreign meddling" in Ethiopia's internal affairs.

President Sahle-Work Zewde, meanwhile, accused foreign media of trying to foment division among senior officials after he was cited in a report in the French-language magazine **Jeune Afrique** as making comments critical of Abiy. Since then, the state media regulator accused local TV station 'Yegna TV' of spreading "false information" and producing "time irrelevant" reports. Pro-government media has also seized on a Russian report claiming US and other Western diplomats (those named are, in fact, all former diplomats) held discussions with TPLF representatives over Zoom in which they were broadly supportive of the TPLF's military aims. One former US official, for example, reportedly said she hoped to see the TPLF achieve "military success". The participants were also critical of efforts by African Union envoy Olusegun Obasanjo.



Prediction



Map 2: Debra Sina Valley

Conflict

- Legesse Tulu said on 01 December that the government would "in a short period of time" retake Dessie and Lalibela (**see Map 1 above - which the ENDF reported regaining on 04 December**). This suggests that the ENDF hopes to push northeast and cut off those opposition fighters encircling Debre Sina.
- It is **LIKELY** that the TDF/OLA advance towards Addis was stalled at Debre Sina due to both the geography – high, mountainous region with tight passes (**see Map 2 above**) - and also the possible provision of armaments by the UAE as well as a more effective use of airstrikes and drones (though credible reports of drone strikes are still limited). The ENDF

will be able to continue holding this position for now (at least in the short term) – if they continue to use their air superiority effectively, allowing them to bring up reinforcements to further support those at Debre Sina.

- The TDF/OLA will also be stretched by the ENDF current control of the A1 (**see Map 1 on page 1**) supply route into Djibouti which the TDF/OLA's efforts to retake appeared to stall last week following strategic use of air strikes by the ENDF.
- Although the killing of 12 “senior” TPLF commanders is yet to be confirmed, Communications Minister Legesse Tulu's comments about the use of “technology” to minimise casualties suggests that targeted drone strikes are becoming an important part of the government's defensive campaign.
- The use of this “technology” increases the risk to civilians and civilian objects including to those working or travelling in opposition-controlled areas. There will be a **HIGH** risk to buildings and vehicles **LIKELY** to be utilised by more senior TPLF figures. The Tekeze hydropower plant was also hit in a 29 November airstrike which put it out of action, suggesting that immunity for major infrastructure sites is not ensured and that these will also be targeted during the current air and drone campaign.
- Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu discussed the situation in Ethiopia with his Ethiopian counterpart on 26 November. According to Turkish media, Çavuşoğlu offered “support” to end the conflict, which may well be a veiled reference to the provision of Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 drones that Addis has reportedly tried to buy. The mainstream media has become aware of the ENDF's drone capability and there is a high risk of “circular reporting” in relation to drones at the moment. Circular reporting occurs when a piece of information appears to be corroborated by multiple independent sources, but in reality, all reports ultimately originate from the same single source. Any new claims regarding drone capability should be treated with some caution.
- The continued conflict is **LIKELY** to have a significant impact on humanitarian access in areas close to or on the TPLF/OLA side of the front lines in the weeks ahead. However, a convoy of around 40 lorries carrying humanitarian supplies left for Mekelle over six days ago. That being said, humanitarian access remains fragile.
- It seems probable that the ENDF saw the continued protests against the last month's military coup in Khartoum as an opportunity to act against a distracted Sudanese military and thus cut overt and covert supplies to the ENDF from Sudan. If so, further ENDF operations to secure the al-Fashaga area are **LIKELY** so long as the Sudanese military remains distracted by protests against its takeover - although Lt Gen al-Burhan's visit and the subsequent Sudanese counter offensive seem intended to show that this is not the case, so any immediate military moves are **UNLIKELY**.

Media/ Diplomatic

- The campaign against critical media suggests that credible information will become harder to obtain and also to evaluate in the weeks ahead. Indeed, the joint civilian-military State of Emergency Command is now the only body “permitted” to provide information about the ongoing conflict. Misinformation is also **LIKELY** to increase as the authorities further limit the freedom of movement of independent journalists as well as so-called ‘citizen journalists’ who post news on social media. Indeed, the Ethiopian government on 30 December **filed a complaint against Twitter** accusing it of suspending accounts criticizing the TPLF.
- Russian and Chinese reports about the purported Zoom meeting of former diplomats and TPLF officials made much of the CIA links to USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy. This highlights the significant reputational risks inside Ethiopia for organisations accepting money from foreign government bodies that have been critical of Abiy's administration. These could further heighten the threat to those staff members still in-country should the government's media campaign become even more heated.



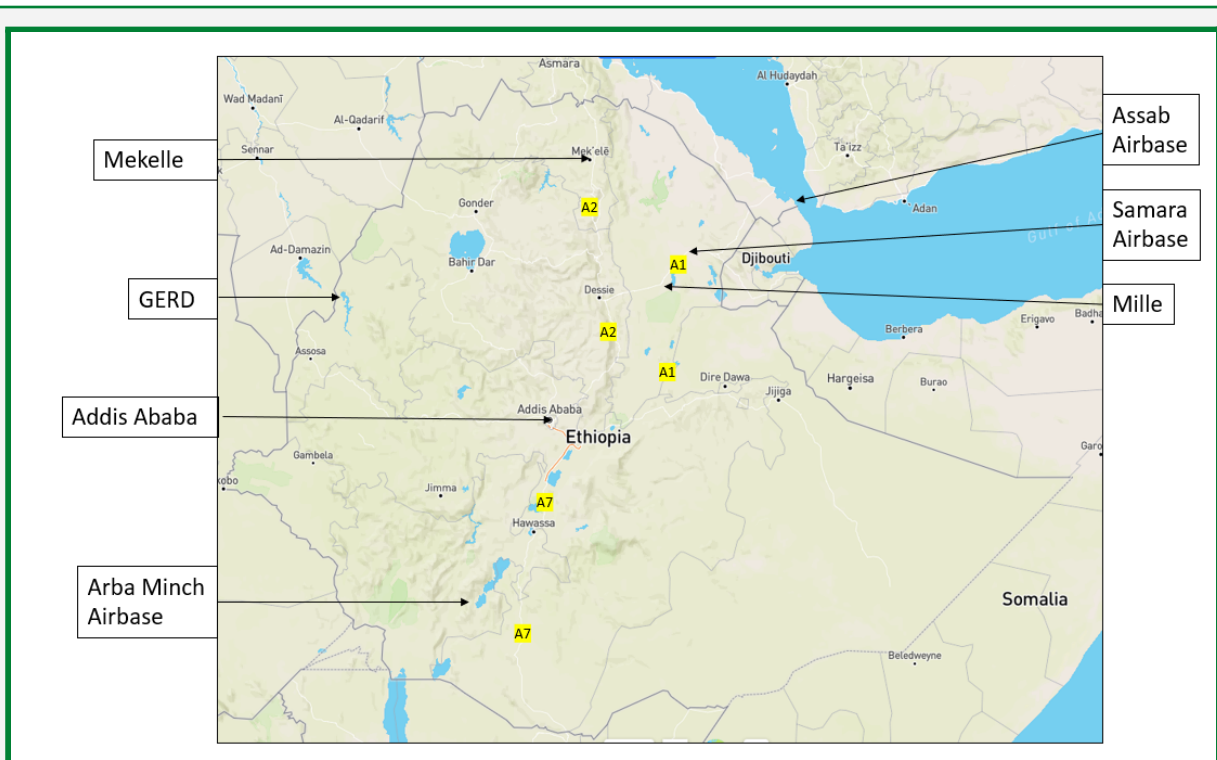
Mitigation

- All local staff should remain as apolitical as possible, especially in light of the **current profiling** ongoing within cities such as Addis. This report should be either restricted within Addis or deleted from hard drives inside the country once it has been read.
- Plan for methods of emergency communication, considering that communication blackouts are **HIGHLY LIKELY**. Local staff should have a range of communication tools to use, including different / separate phones.
- All local staff should ensure that no media apps affiliated to sites such as CNN, the BBC, Twitter or Facebook are found on their phones. Staff should remain aware of media sites that are of “concern” to the government and remove them, accordingly, including browser history.
- Advise staff with Facebook presence to use the Ethiopia Lock Profile facility to avoid being profiled by non-‘friends’: <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/11/update-on-ethiopia/>
- Social media posts should be kept to a minimum and have no reference to their organisation or politics. Pictures of family should be also minimised or removed entirely.
- If working or travelling in opposition-controlled areas – be aware of surroundings and probable escape routes and where possible maintain distance from opposition infrastructure or vehicles. This includes civilian infrastructure for example hydropower plants and electricity stations.
- **Evacuation planning:** Land movement to either the north or east of Addis is inadvisable because of the risk of further clashes and checkpoints instituted by both sides as well as local pro-government militias.
- **Evacuation planning: local staff:** should be offered evacuation to the south of the country - near to Kenyan border (via the A7) if fighting moves to Kombulcha, though worth noting that some organisations are suggesting to staff to alternatively “hibernate in situ”. Contingency plans should be set up to aid their relocation into other countries in the region. Be aware that the government is profiling all those leaving Addis, especially by commercial air routes.

Background Brief: Drones

The information below provides an overview of the presently known drones the ENDF may have access to and describes their capabilities.

Open-source imagery showed Prime Minister Abiy inspecting Iranian drone support facilities and equipment at Samara Airport in Afar in early August. Analysis of news reports and satellite photographs taken around the same time suggests that the drone pictured (and a second that was seen with it in a satellite image four days later) was almost certainly an Iranian Mohajer-6 UCAV (or armed drone). Tigrayan sources subsequently claimed, plausibly, that these drones were used to attack targets in Tigray. Indeed, on 13 August they posted imagery of the remains of a missile known to be carried by the Mohajer-6 on Twitter. Until November, however, there were few credible sightings. Some regional commentators have plausibly suggested that this is due to problems with their control systems. Since the beginning of the month, however, a pair of Mohajer-6s were regularly sighted on the ground at Semara Airport. Their frequent repositioning suggests that they may now be conducting regular flights. Despite the obvious presence of Iranian made equipment, including a control vehicle, there have been no credible reports of Iranian personnel supporting Ethiopia’s UCAV capability inside the country.



Map 3: Latest Location Of Airbases With Drones

Mohajer-6: Overview

The Mohajer-6 claims a flight endurance of 12 hours with an operating range of 200km (constrained by the need for radio communications for the remote control of its target acquisition and reconnaissance capabilities). This constraint is a result of the need to communicate by super high frequency (SHF) radio which requires direct line of sight (LoS) between the base control station and the drone – an almost unlimited range could be achieved by using a satellite uplink – as most sophisticated Western UCAVs do - or even ground or airborne rebroadcast stations.

Subsequent poor-quality imagery of a drone in the air, identified as being **MORE LIKELY** a Mohajer-6 (though possibly a Turkish Bayraktar TB2 UCAV) flying near Harar Meda Airbase, in Debre Zeit (Bishoftu). We believe that this was far **MORE LIKELY** to be a Mohajer-6 as Abiy only discussed the purchase of the Bayraktar from Turkey in mid-August and there has been no evidence of Turkish personnel training the ENDF inside Ethiopia – in contrast to during Ankara's deployment of the Bayraktar to both Azerbaijan and Libya where training could be observed. That said, subsequent satellite imagery of the adjacent Dejen Aviation Engineering Complex (DAVEC) shows construction underway for what appears to be new infrastructure for the operation of drones several hundred meters away from the DAVEC facilities. These are where civilian contractors currently service the ETAF's fixed wing aircraft and helicopters.

Bayraktar TB2: Overview

The Bayraktar TB2 claims a flight endurance of 27 hours, but with a rather more realistic LoS operating range of 150km (again constrained by the need for radio control). The Bayratkar TB2 does however have a triple modular redundancy flight control system making it considerably less vulnerable to jamming than Iranian-made UCAVs – several of which have been downed merely by jamming their control signals - but it is still reliant on SHF communications for overall control and the passage of data.

A cargo flight from Chengdu, China (where the Chinese Wing Loong I UCAV is produced), to Harar Meda in mid-September was quickly followed by the appearance of three Wing Loong Is on satellite imagery of the base. Some weeks earlier, a model of the Wing Loong I was prominently displayed during an interview with the commander of the Ethiopian Air Force - which was almost entirely focused on drone warfare. A second flight from Chengdu was noted on 17 September. By early October, images of them in the skies over Tigray were being posted. There have also been, so far unsubstantiated, claims that the UAE has deployed its own Wing Loong I UCAVs out of Assab Air Base in Eritrea in support of the ENDF. It is now estimated that the ENDF has between six and ten Wing Loong Is, although this total **LIKELY** also includes those operated by the UAE. Again, despite the obvious presence of Chinese UCAVs, there have been no credible reports of Chinese personnel supporting Ethiopia's UCAV capability inside the country. That said, it should also be noted that Addis has only recently purchased suitable air-to-ground missiles for the Wing Loong I.

Wing Loong: Overview

The Wing Loong I is a much older design than either the Mohajer-6 or the Bayraktar TB2, being an almost exact replica of the US MQ-1 Predator design - but claims a flight endurance of 20 hours. It too claims to be able to transmit and receive data over a line of sight (LOS) range of 200km (constrained by the need for radio control). Domestic Chinese versions also have a satellite communication system but there is no imagery to suggest that the necessary uplink equipment has been made available to Ethiopia, suggesting that it is still reliant on LoS SHF communications for overall control and the passage of data.

It should also be noted that the US operated a drone base at Arba Minch, some 400km south of Addis Ababa, between 2011 and 2016 when it was handed back to the ENDF. UCAVs from there operated against counter-terrorism targets across the Horn of Africa, particularly in Somalia; a tasking now carried out from Djibouti. Arba Minch's location, so far south of Addis Ababa, suggests that it is **UNLIKELY** to be used for operations against Tigrayan forces. Its good road and air access together with its relative isolation does however suggest that it could be used to train new drone operators and other support staff away from possible media compromise.

Related Content

- At least 24 aid workers have been reportedly killed since the start of the conflict. This data is available on our [website](#) or on [HDX](#).
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