

The Future of Armed Groups in Africa

Conference Hosted by
State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research and
U.S. Africa Command
Garmisch, Germany
November 13-14, 2009

Ethiopian Armed Groups

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Ethiopian Armed Groups since World War II

Ethiopia has a rich history dating back to the late 1950s of armed movements or, as they prefer to call themselves, liberation movements/fronts. After World War II, these movements started as a challenge to Ethiopian hegemony in Ethiopia's province of Eritrea. The urban-based Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) began in 1958 as a Muslim organization that soon attracted Eritreans of different faiths and backgrounds. Its declared aim was an armed struggle to liberate Eritrea from Ethiopia. In 1961, a rival Muslim group, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), arose and became the primary Eritrean armed movement by 1965. The ELF focused its effort in the rural areas of the western lowlands. It did not have a clear ideology other than self-determination. Christian Eritreans eventually joined the ELF, but the leadership remained largely Muslim. The ELF began to fragment at the beginning of the 1970s. The most important organization to emerge from the fragmentation was the largely Christian-led Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which espoused a Marxist philosophy. The EPLF became the primary Eritrean nationalist organization by the early 1980s as the ELF faded away. The EPLF contributed significantly to the defeat in 1991 of the Mengistu Haile Mariam government in Ethiopia. In 1991, Eritrea became *de facto* independent.

A variety of armed groups, although most had few armed recruits, followed the Eritrean movements. They included, for example, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia, the Sidama Liberation Front, the Somali Abo Liberation Front, the Gambela People's Liberation Front, the Beni Shangul Liberation Front, the Afar Liberation Front and the Tigray Liberation Front. None of these organizations had much success and for the most part they are now inactive. They do, however, have something in common. All of them developed as a result of grievances against the central Ethiopian government and organized on the basis of a particular ethnic group and/or region of the country. Unlike the Eritrean armed movements, they tended not to attract support across ethnic lines. One group, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), did have a profound impact on Ethiopia's future. Formed in 1975, the TPLF sought self-determination within a unitary Ethiopian state. Aided by cooperation with the EPLF and much more limited support of several other liberation organizations, the TPLF's guerrilla campaign overthrew in 1991 the government in Addis Ababa. The TPLF now functions as the principal party in the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and its leader, Meles Zenawi, is Ethiopia's prime minister.

The remainder of my remarks will focus on the two most important armed organizations that are militarily opposing the EPRDF government in Ethiopia today: the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). I will also discuss briefly the quiescent United Western Somali Liberation Front (UWSLF) and conclude with some implications for U.S. policy.

Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)

The Oromo constitute the most numerous ethnic group in Ethiopia and occupy a huge land area that extends from the Sudan border to the Kenyan border. According to the 2007 census, the Oromo account for about 35 percent of Ethiopia's population. (The OLF claims that the Oromo constitute almost half of Ethiopia's population.) Throughout recent Ethiopian history, the Oromo have never held political power commensurate with their numbers, resulting in political marginalization and real and perceived grievances. The Oromo practice Islam, Christianity and traditional Oromo faiths. The largest group is Muslim with Christians not far behind. Persons following traditional beliefs constitute the smallest percentage.

Established in 1973, the fundamental objective of the OLF is the Oromo peoples' right to national self-determination. Some in the OLF interpret this as an independent Oromia while others seek Oromo autonomy within a unified Ethiopia where the political system reflects the Oromo population percentages. The OLF describes its armed resistance as an act of self-defense by the Oromo people against successive Ethiopian governments. From its inception, however, there has been tension within the OLF between those who pursue political or military solutions to resolve Oromo grievances. The OLF opposed the Derg regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam and even aligned itself with the TPLF during the period immediately before the overthrow in 1991 of Mengistu. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the OLF controlled significant territory in southeastern Ethiopia. It opened a front in western Ethiopia in 1981 from bases in Sudan.

In 1991, as the TPLF marched on Addis Ababa, the OLF advocated a policy of ethnic federalism. The OLF joined the EPRDF and EPLF at a conference in London aimed at a peaceful political transition after the fall of Mengistu. The OLF did not, however, achieve its objective in London of convincing the EPRDF to hold a referendum on Oromo self-determination. Nevertheless, it joined the new transitional government led by the EPRDF. At the same time, it retained some of its fighting force. Its participation in the EPRDF's transitional government was brief and contentious. The OLF objected to the procedures for district and regional elections in June 1992 and withdrew from the transitional government.

OLF leaders went into exile and the organization resumed its armed struggle to liberate Oromia. The OLF armed insurrection occurred mostly in eastern Ethiopia where it achieved little. Some forces, which claimed to be OLF, resorted to terrorist tactics by placing bombs in hotels and restaurants. The OLF signed a political and military agreement with the Ogaden National Liberation Front in 1996. It also continued ties with the largely defunct Sidama Liberation Front, Beni Shangul Liberation Movement and Gambela People's Liberation Front. Other OLF supporters regrouped in Sudan where the government welcomed them until the outbreak of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war in 1998, after which Ethiopia normalized relations with Sudan and convinced it to end support for

the OLF. Requiring a new base, the OLF moved its operations briefly to unstable Somalia on Ethiopia's eastern border and operated sporadically out of northern Kenya. Eritrea, which for all practical purposes has been at war with Ethiopia since 1998, began training OLF fighters and provided them with military assistance. The OLF concluded that Somalia was too difficult a country to operate from and that most Somalis had no interest in helping the Oromo. The OLF then moved its headquarters to Eritrea, which was and continues to be the only country bordering Ethiopia that is willing to receive the organization. The OLF also maintains small political offices in London, Washington, Khartoum and perhaps elsewhere.

Soon after the OLF left the Ethiopian transitional government in 1992 and went into exile, it began to engage in a series of talks organized outside Ethiopia by third parties to establish a process for resolving differences with the EPRDF. The most recent initiative involved Oromo elders and the OLF, who met in Amsterdam in late 2008. The discussions continued into 2009. All of the efforts so far have failed. The OLF insists on holding substantive talks without conditions while the EPRDF has consistently required that the OLF first renounce the use of armed force and accept the Ethiopian constitution. The EPRDF argues that the OLF is a terrorist organization and encourages foreign governments to add the OLF to their lists of such groups. The OLF strongly condemns terrorism in all of its forms and points out that it is no more a terrorist organization than was the TPLF when it toppled the Mengistu regime.

Since the EPRDF came to power in 1991, the OLF military wing has never seriously threatened Ethiopian government forces. Over the years, the OLF has conducted small scale military actions. In 2006, Brigadier-General Kemal Gelchu, an Oromo commanding Ethiopia's 18th Army division on the Ethiopia-Eritrea border, defected to the OLF with between 150 and 500 soldiers. This development led many to believe that the OLF would finally become a significant military threat. It did not happen and the OLF leadership actually split in 2008. There was already a dissident OLF faction led by former OLF chairman Galassa Dilbo in London. The new split left the main OLF group under its longtime chairman, Dawud Ibsa, at its headquarters in Asmara. The new faction is led by Kemal Gelchu, who remained in Asmara. Lenco Latta, a former OLF deputy secretary general who lives in Oslo, joined this faction. Efforts to reconcile the factions have failed, further diminishing the OLF's military activity inside Ethiopia.

Because of the OLF leadership split, it is difficult to estimate the number of effective soldiers now under arms. Earlier estimates put the figure at a few thousand; the OLF has claimed as many as 5,000 soldiers in recent years. The number is probably lower now. The OLF recruits fighters from Oromo communities inside Ethiopia, Oromo refugees outside the country and Oromo defectors from the Ethiopian army. The OLF has both long and medium range radio sets and trained radio operators. Military equipment includes Kalashnikov and G-3 assault rifles, RPGs and anti-tank mines. The OLF frequently uses small remote-controlled explosive devices. Eritrea has provided some military training to OLF fighters and may provide military advisers and land mine experts. Eritrea is the primary source of arms. OLF troops are organized conventionally into military units with corresponding rank structures and differentiated roles within each unit. The Oromo diaspora in North America, Europe and Australia contributes funds that help pay for headquarters' expenses and the purchase of weapons.

Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF)

The Ogadeni-inhabited area constitutes most of Ethiopia's Somali or Region Five. Although most of the inhabitants are Ogadenis, there are significant numbers of non-Ogadeni Somalis living in the northern most part of the region, along the border with Somaliland and in the southwest corner of the region. These non-Ogadeni clan groups generally do not accept the term Ogaden as a definition for the entire region and see it as an effort by the Ogadeni majority to dominate other Somali clans. Many non-Ogaden Somalis even feel threatened by the ONLF and have established rival political groups. Nevertheless, some non-Ogaden Somalis in Region Five support the ONLF. The 2007 census put the population of Somali region at just under 4.5 million. The total number of Somalis in Ethiopia was just under 4.6 million or 6.2 percent of the population, the third most populous ethnic group nationwide after the Oromo and Amhara.

The ONLF arose in 1984 in the years after Ethiopian forces, aided by Cuban troops and Soviet advisers, defeated Siad Barre's Somali army and the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) in the 1977-1978 Ogaden War. Six leaders from the Ogaden-based WSLF split with the organization and formed the ONLF. The collapse of the government in neighboring Somalia in 1991 caused many Ogadeni who had taken refuge there after the Ogaden War to flee the country and return to the Ogaden. This facilitated ONLF recruitment. Mohamed Omar Osman became ONLF Chairman in 1991.

The Mengistu government in Ethiopia also fell in 1991. The ONLF registered as a political party and participated in elections for the regional Somali parliament, winning 84 percent of the seats. The ONLF headed the Somali regional government from 1991 until 1994, initially in alliance with the WSLF. The ONLF-dominated Regional Assembly passed a resolution in 1994 to hold a referendum on independence for the Ogaden. The EPRDF responded by forcing the ONLF out of the government, replaced it with more pliable groups and moved the regional capital to the northern town of Jigjiga, where non-Ogadenis predominate. The ONLF then took up arms against the EPRDF. Following the outbreak of conflict in 1998 between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the Eritrean government took an interest in funding and training the ONLF.

In 1995, the EPRDF did attempt to resolve its differences with the ONLF when Meles met with the leadership in Kebri Dehar. He asked the ONLF to lay down its arms, accept the Ethiopian constitution and participate in government institutions. The two parties failed to reach agreement. The last formal meeting between the EPRDF and ONLF occurred in 1998 when the EPRDF conveyed the same message. Since then, the ONLF has insisted that any talks with the EPRDF take place in the presence of neutral observers and in a neutral location. The two sides have not even been able to reach agreement on modalities for another formal meeting. Subsequent informal meetings between the EPRDF and Ogadeni elders were also unsuccessful in reaching an accommodation. The last effort failed in 2006; the Ethiopian government and ONLF have effectively been in a state of war ever since.

Unlike the WSLF, which received support from Somalia when there was a viable Somali government, the ONLF says that it is independent of Somalia and has no desire to join its neighbor to the east. The ONLF did, however, condemn the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia late in 2006. Mohamed Omar Osman commented recently that the ONLF goal is to have a referendum in Somali Region that enables the residents to decide if they want

to remain part of Ethiopia, become an independent state or join Somalia. According to one recent report, the Mohamed Omar Osman faction may be more willing to finesse its earlier preference for an independent Ogaden. Ethiopia has charged that the ONLF is a terrorist organization and that it is currently collaborating with the extremist Islamic group in Somalia, al-Shabaab, which has acknowledged ties to al-Qaeda. The ONLF leadership strongly denies that it uses terrorist tactics and states that it engages in no contact with al-Shabaab. In a March 2008 interview with *al-Jazeera*, the ONLF's Second Deputy Chairman, Abdulkadir Hassan Hirmoge, did acknowledge that close ties exist between the ONLF and other Islamists in Somalia. On the other hand, Somali authorities in Puntland and Somaliland cooperate with Ethiopia and pose a challenge to the ONLF. For its part, the ONLF accuses the Ethiopian forces of engaging in human rights abuses, war crimes and worse, charges denied by Ethiopia.

The ONLF has periodically experienced factional divisions. In 1998, a major ONLF faction merged with another Somali political group and formed the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP) that aligned itself with the EPRDF. The ONLF boycotted regional elections in 2000 and 2004 that were won by the SPDP. Insecurity in Somali Region forced the postponement of parliamentary elections in 2005, which the ONLF boycotted. The ONLF then stepped up military attacks. Early in 2009, Ethiopian forces killed a senior ONLF commander, Mohamed Sirad Dolal, who had been in a leadership struggle with Mohamed Omar Osman. This development resulted in a formal split and the creation of a breakaway ONLF group led by Salahdin Abdurahman Maow.

The ONLF does not pose a significant military threat to Ethiopian forces, although it did conduct a major attack in 2007 on a Chinese construction camp protected by Ethiopian forces and used to prospect for hydrocarbons in the Ogaden. When the shooting was over, the ONLF killed 74 persons, including 9 Chinese, who may have been caught in the cross fire. The ONLF had warned all international companies to stay out of the Ogaden or be subject to attack. It continues to issue these warnings. Since this large attack, the ONLF seems to have confined most of its military activity to the Ethiopia-Somalia border area. It is nearly impossible to verify the numerous ONLF claims of military victories and Ethiopian government denials. An ONLF fighter recently commented to a BBC reporter that "we are no match for direct combat, so we must rely on quick surprise attacks." In spite of its grandiose press releases, the ONLF's military effort has consisted primarily of hit-and-run attacks, ambushes and the use of landmines and small explosive devices. In most cases, Ethiopian government casualties have been modest and material damage limited. Nevertheless, the ONLF continues to pose a challenge to Ethiopian forces, which probably accounts for Ethiopia's unwillingness to allow independent third parties to travel in the area.

Reliable figures on ONLF fighters under arms are not available. According to one ONLF account, by 2004 Eritrea was training between 2,000 and 3,000 ONLF fighters. Some of the older ONLF troops received military training while serving in Siad Barre's army. The younger soldiers have had much less training. The ONLF reportedly is well supplied with radio equipment, AK-47 rifles, ammunition, RPGs, and land mines. At various times, it has received financial support from Eritrea, some of the Arab states, Sudan and the Ogadeni diaspora in North America, Europe and the Middle East. It signed an alliance with the OLF in 1996 and joined five other Ethiopian dissident groups in 2006 as part of the Alliance for Freedom and Democracy.

United Western Somali Liberation Front (UWSLF)

This organization began as the WSLF in the early 1970s in collaboration with the Siad Barre government in neighboring Somalia. The Somali Abo Liberation Front, which operated in Bale, Sidamo and Arsi, aligned itself with the WSLF. From the beginning, the WSLF's goal was to unite with neighboring Somalia as part of Siad Barre's Greater Somalia irredentist policy. With the help of the Somali armed forces, the WSLF almost achieved this objective during the 1977-1978 Ogaden War. At its peak, the WSLF had as many as 15,000 soldiers. Following its defeat in the Ogaden War, most of the WSLF troops retreated into Somalia from where they carried out sporadic attacks until the Somali government forbade them to use its territory to launch attacks into Ethiopia. As Somalia's internal problems increased, it ended financial support for the WSLF in 1982. This led to the creation two years later of the ONLF, which evolved independent of Somali government assistance. The WSLF ceased to exist as an effective guerrilla organization by 1989. It reportedly had ties in the mid-1990s with the extremist Islamist Somali group, al-Ittihad al-Islami.

Several years ago, some of the original WSLF supporters formed the UWSLF and even attracted a few ONLF members. Most non-Ogadeni Somalis were more comfortable in an organization that had Somali rather than Ogaden in the title. The UWSLF issued a press release in 2006 stating that it is a political and armed organization dedicated to freedom in Western Somalia (Ogaden). It warned companies to stay out of the region. In 2006, it captured two employees, one Irish and one Ethiopian Somali, working in the Ogaden for the International Committee of the Red Cross. The UWSLF released them six days later, explaining that it thought they were employees of an oil company. The UWSLF continues its links with Somali Islamists, including Hizbul Islam but not necessarily al-Shabaab. The UWSLF has demonstrated almost no military capacity and rarely issues press releases. It apparently does not receive support from Eritrea.

Conclusions

I end with seven conclusions that have implications for U.S. policy as the United States takes account of Ethiopian dissident groups.

1. Both the Oromo and Somalis have long been politically marginalized and both have legitimate grievances. In the early years after the EPRDF took power, the OLF and ONLF participated in the new government only to become disenchanted after a brief period. The EPRDF has on occasion tried to negotiate its differences with both groups, so far without success. To the extent that the OLF and ONLF insist on achieving independent states, the EPRDF will resist. An independent Oromia would effectively divide Ethiopia into disconnected parts and end the country as it is known today. It is important, however, to continue discussions with both the Oromo and Somalis, recognizing that both groups of people have legitimate grievances even if they do not bring a unified position to the table. External players, including the United States, should do more to encourage these discussions and help identify a time and place where the talks can take place.

2. Both the OLF and the ONLF, putting aside internal splits, have a certain mystique and significant support in their diasporas. To the extent that they stand for the mitigation of Oromo and Ogadeni grievances, they also have widespread support in Oromia and the Ogaden respectively. Inside Ethiopia, however, there is probably much less support for the leadership, tactics and perhaps even programs of both organizations.

3. The OLF, ONLF, UWSLF and most previous Ethiopian liberation groups have attracted support on the basis of ethnic and/or regional ties. While this has also been a common practice in other parts of the world, it creates a special challenge for a country that has some 85 ethnic groups and has in the past confronted a dozen or more similar liberation movements. The way in which Ethiopia deals with these challenges sets a precedent for the possible revival of other movements or even the creation of new ones. It should also be noted that the leadership of these three groups includes few, if any, women.

4. Since the EPRDF took power in 1991, the three movements discussed above have not posed a serious military threat. Although the OLF and ONLF have significant popular support, they have not been able to translate that support into an effective military force. In fact, the only Ethiopian movements since World War II that have been able to mount a credible military threat to the existing Ethiopian government have been the EPLF and the TPLF. The WSLF succeeded briefly but only with the substantial help of the Somali armed forces. Both the OLF and the ONLF rely heavily on support from Eritrea.

5. Armed groups representing both the Oromo and the Somalis have a long history of internal leadership divisions. Not surprisingly, the EPRDF has exploited this factionalism. While this is a common feature of liberation groups, it is a reminder that third parties such as the United States need to understand fully with whom they are speaking when they communicate with representatives of these organizations.

6. The government of Ethiopia would like governments such as the United States to put both the OLF and ONLF on their lists of terrorist organizations. The United States has properly resisted this request. Until such time as one or both organizations are proven to be engaging in terrorist acts that transcend the kinds of activities employed by a variety of Ethiopian liberation groups in recent decades, they do not merit inclusion on these lists.

7. All sides to these conflicts engage in human rights abuses. When and only when the abuses are well documented, countries such as the United States should speak out. The United States and other countries that have good relations with Ethiopia should also urge the EPRDF to open up contested regions, especially the Ogaden, to independent observers and the media.