

DEADLY SKIES: DRONE WARFARE IN ETHIOPIA AND THE FUTURE OF CONFLICT IN AFRICA

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SUMMARY

- The use of military drones is spreading across Africa, further destabilising countries facing deep tensions between typically authoritarian governments and rebel groups. While these governments have frequently pursued violence over dialogue in the past, the increasing availability of drones makes the military option seem cheaper and easier.
- In Ethiopia, where drone strikes are widespread, the government's use of drones has not been enough to dislodge rebel groups from their strongholds. Deadly wars in the Amhara and Oromia regions have dragged on, while the war in Tigray rests on a fragile treaty.
- Meanwhile, drone distributor countries including China, Iran, Turkey and the UAE do not insist their clientele respect human rights. With no incentive to practice restraint, drone atrocities across Africa appear to be becoming increasingly frequent, causing friction with Western partners.
- As seen in the case of Ethiopia, this has paved the way for the likes of Turkey and Russia to expand their influence, helping facilitate a diplomatic drift away from the West that has emboldened African governments keen on pursuing war and cracking down on critics.

Made for war

“Drones were made for war! We purchased them for battle, not to parade them in the media,” Ethiopian army chief field-marshal Birhanu Jula told an Ethiopian state broadcaster in late 2023. “If we find groups of extremists, we will strike them!” he threatened, before adding that the Ethiopian air force does not target civilians in drone strikes.

Yet Ethiopia’s drone-backed wars tell a different story. In just a few years, they have become some of the deadliest conflicts for civilians in the country’s history. Since the government began deploying drones in November 2020, aerial strikes have ravaged communities, including in the particularly brutal civil war in Tigray (2020-2022) as well as lower-scale ongoing conflicts in the regions of Oromia (2019-) and Amhara (2023-). African Union (AU) mediators estimate the Tigray war killed 600,000 people in the two years of fighting, making it one of the deadliest of the 21st century. (The Ethiopian civil war that ended in 1991 had a similar combat death toll, but it lasted for 30 years.) In 2021 alone, 5.1 million Ethiopians were displaced from their homes, breaking a world record for internal displacement that had been held by Syria since 2013.

To help wage these wars, the Ethiopian government has sourced cheap drones from China, Iran, the UAE and especially Turkey, none of which implement human rights requirements in drone sales. These weapons have caused carnage nationwide, killing thousands of civilians across Ethiopia and targeting hospitals, schools and public transport. [1]

Since 2020, reports of the Ethiopian military’s complicity in war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide have led many Western states to distance themselves from their once reliable partner in the Horn of Africa. Meanwhile, drone-supplier countries’ soft power has skyrocketed, and Russia has seized the opportunity to expand its influence and support Ethiopia’s war crimes when Western diplomats refused, cut funding and introduced sanctions.

The case of Ethiopia points to a concerning trend emerging across the continent. As in the wars in Tigray, Oromia and Amhara, many domestic conflicts in Africa are inflamed by ethnic tensions, especially the repression of ethnic groups' demands for autonomy by centralised governments. In such cases, lasting peace requires mediation and dialogue, but too often African governments have instead responded with violence. A recent development—greater access to military drones—is making this a more enticing option: cheap drones from providers like the UAE and Turkey offer a way to bomb opposition forces with fewer military losses than ground-combat and at a fraction of the cost of attack helicopters or fighter jets. Together this can make governments more confident in a military victory and less willing to come to the negotiating table.

While drones can and have proven decisive on the battlefield—for example when the Ethiopian government pushed back Tigrayan fighters who were bearing down on the capital in 2021—they have been nowhere near as efficient at dislodging rebels from their strongholds. Nor have drones spared the Ethiopian government the need for mediated peace talks, which all rebel groups have been, or are currently, engaged in with the government. As the case of Ethiopia shows, trigger-happy governments lead to long, deadly wars—not quick military victory.

Focusing on Ethiopia, where drone strikes have been among the most extensive in Africa, this policy brief shows how drone use could be changing the way governments conduct their wars and their foreign policy. It then presents a model of “drone diplomacy” in which countries like Turkey use the sale of drones to African governments to extend their influence in the continent.

This paper concludes with recommendations for European policymakers who are now facing heavily militarised states, cosy with drone-supplier countries and Moscow, and creating hundreds of thousands of refugees keen to escape war and oppression.

Ethiopia's return to authoritarianism and conflict

Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed rose to power in 2018 on the back of popular uprisings against the country's longstanding authoritarian government, which was in effect run by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). He promised to implement reforms to foster democratic freedoms, liberalise the country's economy and bring region-wide peace, winning him broad political support and development aid from the West. In July of that year, Abiy met with his Eritrean counterpart, ending the enmity between the two countries that had prevailed since the end of the 1998-2000 border war and earning him the Nobel Peace Prize.

For the first time in the country's history, a peaceful, democratic state appeared to be on the horizon.

But the peace did not last long. By early 2019, a small-scale war had broken out in Oromia between the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and government forces after failed negotiations to integrate the OLA into the regional police force. Abiy's commitment to democratic freedoms did not last long either. In 2020, citing safety concerns over the covid-19 pandemic, Abiy postponed the parliamentary election scheduled for that year. Then in June 2020, anti-government demonstrations broke out across Oromia after the assassination of an Oromo singer and activist, Hachalu Hundessa—the tipping point after rising anger over the war in the region. Government forces cracked down on critical voices, jailing thousands of demonstrators, journalists and political opponents, effectively rolling back most of the reforms.

By the end of 2020, the situation in Ethiopia had deteriorated considerably. Abiy's rivals from the TPLF rejected his decision to postpone the election, holding polls of their own in September that Addis Ababa viewed as illegal. The brutal civil war in Tigray would begin one month later, with troops from Abiy's new Eritrean ally fighting alongside Ethiopian forces.

A few weeks after the war broke out, reports of a devastating humanitarian catastrophe began to emerge, including massacres, ethnic cleansing and weaponised rape. A humanitarian siege sealed six million Tigrayans off from the outside world. Much of the suffering happened behind an information blackout, with communication services severed across the region and local journalists and human rights activists targeted by government forces.

By the time Ethiopia's rescheduled election got under way in early 2021, the glimmer of hope in Abiy's premiership had disappeared. Two destructive wars were raging in the Tigray and Oromia regions. The government had arrested thousands of anti-government protesters, political opponents and journalists. Press freedoms were once again non-existent, and Abiy secured a landslide that mirrored the predetermined polls of the previous quarter-century.

Drone use in the Tigray war

Drones are a cost-effective tool to launch quick attacks on everything from rebel artillery positions in battle to training camps deep behind enemy lines. They cost tens of millions of dollars less than attack helicopters or fighter jets, can be dispatched in a matter of hours and need no boots on the ground. For rebel groups, drones are especially demoralising for morale, as they have limited access to defence solutions like surface-to-air missiles to take them down. Meanwhile, rebels' isolation from international drone markets means they are

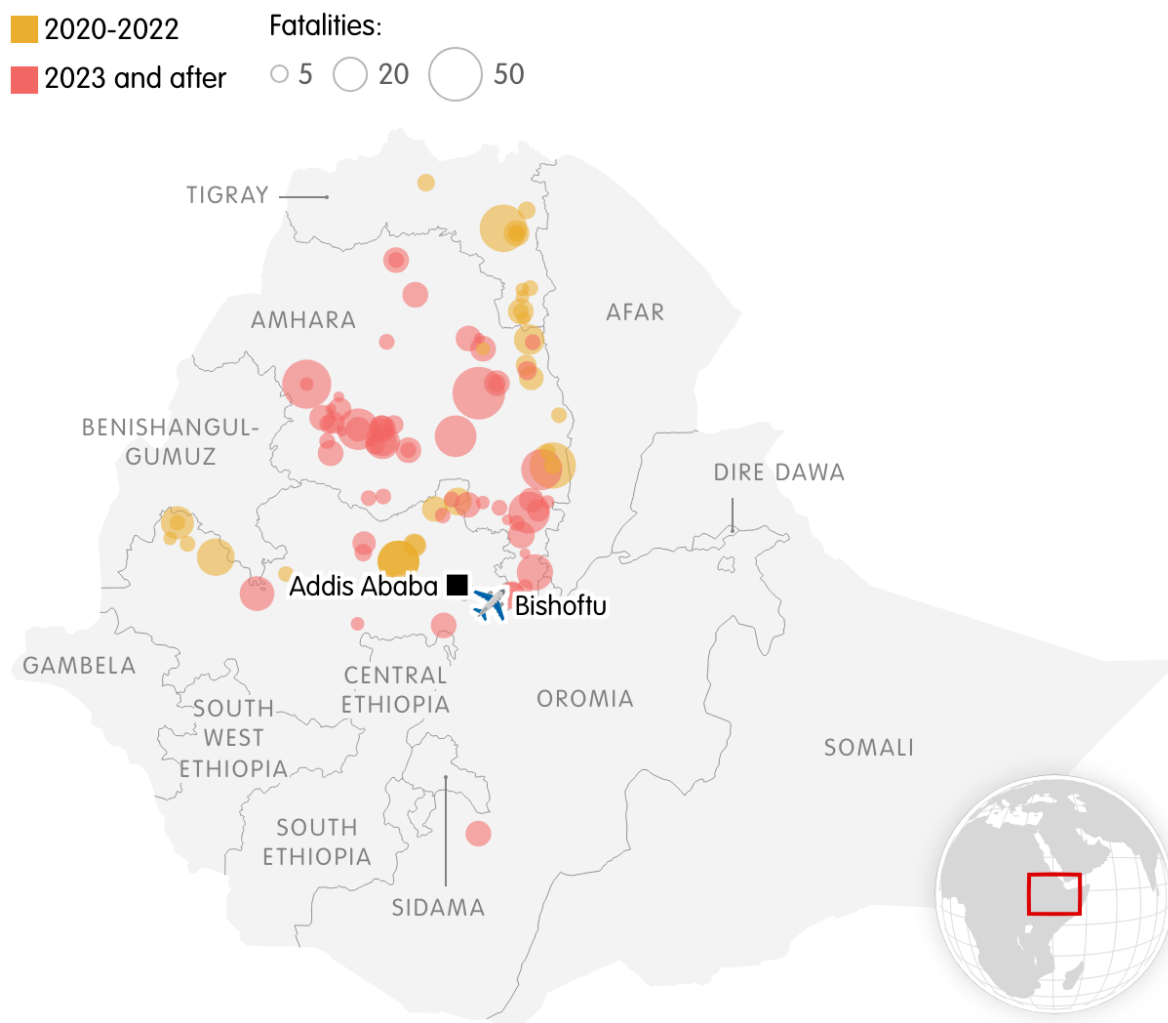
unable to purchase their own and are thus unable to match their enemy's military capabilities.

Ethiopian government forces wasted no time using these advantages to boost their campaign in Tigray. Within weeks, they were accused by TPLF officials of deploying armed drones supplied by the UAE. Speaking to the *New York Times*, US diplomatic sources sighted a small fleet of drones piloted by Emirati pilots carrying out strikes in November 2020. While the media blackout makes it unclear precisely when the Ethiopian army began using drones, by April 2021 it confirmed the reports. At this stage of the war, the Ethiopian army was achieving military success with a limited number of drones.

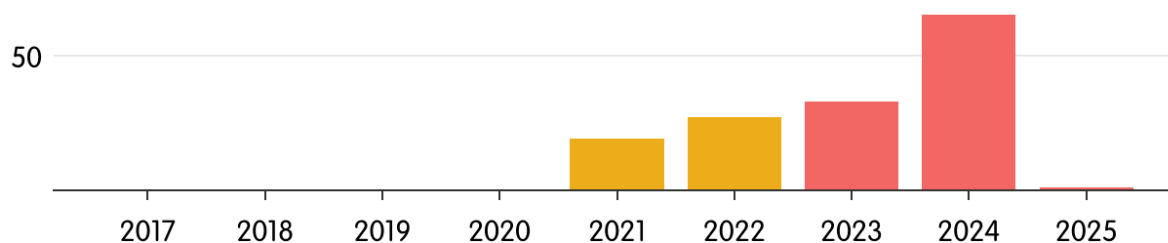
But amid the immense suffering, Tigrayan recruitment soared. The rebels managed to hold out in the mountains of rural Tigray, before launching a counteroffensive that by mid-2021 saw them retake swathes of territory captured by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers during the early weeks of the war. Emboldened, the Tigrayan fighters made a drive into neighbouring regions and southwards towards Addis Ababa with the goal of breaking the siege and eventually unseating the government.

The last time the Tigrayan rebels got this close to the capital, in 1991, the then-president fled the country and his junta was overthrown. In mid-2021, Abiy faced a similarly stretched army with battlefield losses estimated to be in the tens of thousands, worsening ties with the West, sanctions, and immense international pressure to consider dialogue. Tigrayan forces had the upper hand—embassies in Addis Ababa had begun to evacuate their foreign nationals—yet Abiy balked at the idea of a settlement. Instead, the Ethiopian government heavily reinforced its drone arsenal, harnessing its ties with drone distributor countries, the UAE, Iran, China, and especially Turkey.

Drone strikes in Ethiopia



ECFR · ecfr.eu



Source: ACLED (data as of 10 January 2025)
 ECFR · ecfr.eu

The government's drone-backed counteroffensive turned the tide of the war. By December 2021, government forces had pushed the rebels from within 200 kilometres of the capital all the way back to Tigray. Analysts suggest Ethiopia's arsenal of foreign drones is what staved off the threat to the capital from Tigrayan rebels. Without these drones, Addis Ababa would almost certainly have fallen. This military success likely gave Ethiopian officials the confidence to believe that a military victory was still feasible—and that it was worth continuing the fight rather than reaching a settlement.

In August 2022, fierce fighting ended a months-long lull in the war as the Ethiopian military pushed back into Tigray, with drones forming a crucial part of their deadliest campaign. Meanwhile, the war in Oromia was intensifying. The government replicated its military strategy there and turned to drone strikes, killing hundreds of civilians between October and November 2022. Research by the Peace Research Institute Oslo revealed that fighting in Ethiopia as a whole was linked to over 100,000 combat-related deaths in 2022 alone. The majority of these took place following the breakout of renewed fighting in Tigray in August 2022, as well as in Oromia.

However, a pattern was emerging. At previous points in the Tigray war, like in November 2020, the Ethiopian government had reached such military advantage that the rebels simply melted back into the countryside. They then recruited, rearmed and mounted a counterattack. While drones proved to be an effective tool in defending the capital from takeover, on the offensive the military was unable to avoid incurring considerable losses as they advanced. Even using drones, it can be an insurmountable task to root out a battle-hardened rebel insurgency from its mountain stronghold, using an army widely perceived by locals to be an invading force, as the US learned in Afghanistan.

Ethiopia also grappled with a lack of effective military leadership, while Tigrayan rebels had a host of battle-hardened, experienced former national army commanders in their ranks. At the same time, two years of fighting caused huge losses in manpower and resources, while Ethiopia's economy lay in ruins from war and Western sanctions.[2] For the government, it became increasingly clear that military victory in Tigray would be neither quick nor easy. So—even with the Tigrayan capital seemingly surrounded and setbacks mounting for the rebels—the factions announced the signing of the Pretoria treaty, ending the war on November 4th 2022.

In Oromia, where fighting continues, government forces have similarly failed to pacify the region despite their military assaults and drone strikes. Frequently, the OLA launches ambitious assaults on urban areas and can then regroup in the rural countryside where it is unchallenged. In the Amhara war, which broke out in August 2023 after a surprise rebel offensive, the Ethiopian government has again made extensive use of drones. Yet in all three regions, it has proved unable to dislodge rebels from their strongholds—instead, violent quagmires and bloody stalemates drag on.

Timeline of Ethiopian conflicts, 2019-present

Oromia war begins	January 2019	Heavy fighting and at least one airstrike reported in Oromia. War is considered a low-scale insurgency. No drone strikes initially.
Tigray war begins	November 2020	All-out war breaks out, and drone strikes are reported. Three weeks into the war, Abiy declares victory after his forces take the capital city Mekelle (November 28th 2020). Tigray rebels abandon conventional warfare and switch to rebel guerilla insurgency.
	June 28th 2021	Tigray guerilla rebels retake the capital, and force Ethiopian soldiers out of much of Tigray. From July onwards, the rebels make a push towards the capital and neighbouring regions.
	July-August 2021	In response to setbacks from Tigray fighters, the Ethiopian army begins expanding its drone arsenal. Reports of drones from China, Iran and Turkey arriving in Ethiopia make the rounds.
	August 9th 2021	Rebel factions in Tigray and Oromia <i>strike an alliance</i> ↗, and agree to cooperate to overthrow the government. Both groups make advances towards the capital from their respective bases.
	December 2021	Ethiopia's drone-backed counteroffensive <i>halts the rebel offensives on the capital.</i> ↗
	January 2022	The UN confirms that some 108 civilians were killed in drone strikes in Tigray during the first two weeks of 2022 alone, with <i>the Washington Post</i> ↗ confirming that a Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drone was used to kill 55 civilians sheltering at a displaced persons camp on January 7th.
	April 2022	Tigrayan rebels have withdrawn from all territories they had previously occupied, finally <i>departing the neighbouring Afar region</i> ↗ and returning to Tigray. Negotiators work to seal a ceasefire. Fighting slows down, but drone strikes do not.
	August 2022	Lull in the fighting ends, as <i>heavy clashes</i> ↗ break out. Ethiopian army and its allies launch a drone-backed assault on the Tigray region.
	October-November 2022	The Ethiopian air force <i>launch a series of drone strikes</i> ↗ in Oromia to target rebels there. <i>Hundreds of civilians</i> ↗ are reported killed during two months of strikes.
Tigray war ends	November 4th 2022	After months of fierce fighting, horrendous losses, drone strikes and advances made by the Ethiopian army, a <i>ceasefire deal</i> ↗ is agreed to in South Africa between the government and Tigray rebels, ending the Tigray war.
	April 2023	The ceasefire in Tigray is holding but fighting in Oromia is ongoing, and the Ethiopian government orders allied militias in Amhara <i>to disarm.</i> ↗ This decision is unpopular across Amhara and lays the foundation for war that would break out months later.
Amhara war begins	August 2nd 2023	Amhara rebels launch a surprise attack capturing a slew of cities across the region. <i>All-out war breaks out</i> ↗ in the region.
	August 13th 2023	The first <i>confirmed report</i> ↗ of a drone strike massacre in the Amhara war. Twenty-six civilians are killed in the town of Finote Selam. Drone strikes become increasingly common as the war goes on.
	December 18th 2023	CEO of Turkish drones company Bayraktar, Haluk Bayraktar travels to Ethiopia to meet with Abiy Ahmed and receive an award. ↗
	January 2024	Ethiopia begins <i>to receive</i> ↗ new Baykar Akinci drones. Reports of Turkey's approval of the delivery to Ethiopia had first emerged in <i>November 2023.</i> ↗
	February 19th 2024	A drone strike targets a truck ferrying family members home from a child's baptism in the Amhara region, killing <i>at least 30 people</i> ↗, in one of the worst drone atrocities of the newer Amhara conflict.
	February 20th 2025	Sixteen people are killed and 10 others injured in a drone strike that targets local shops and residential structures in the Amhara region. Among the dead are shoppers and people drinking tea nearby, according to the <i>BBC Amharic.</i> ↗

The impact of drone strikes on Ethiopian society

Throughout the war in Tigray, drone strikes have traumatised civilians. Attacks on locations with no valid military targets—including residential areas, the Mekelle city main university campus and even the headquarters of a local television station gave residents the impression that the drone strikes were a tool for collective punishment.

But even as news of atrocities emerged, the early stages of Abiy's war in Tigray enjoyed the support of a significant section of the Ethiopian population due to deep resentment of the TPLF dating back to its rule over the country. In response to the news that Turkish drones were critical in halting the rebel push towards the capital, an outpouring of Ethiopian social media users took to X (then Twitter) expressing their gratitude to Turkey and its president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The hashtag “#thankyouTurkey” briefly trended among Ethiopians in December 2021.

However, public opinion began to shift when it became clear that government forces intended to use drones well after they had pushed back the Tigrayan advance on the capital, and that they would extend the campaign to Amhara, the second largest ethnic group, and to Oromia, the largest region. The prominent Ethiopian journalist Abebe Gellaw, who started the hashtag trend, has since deleted his original tweet.

Nowadays, Ethiopian social media is awash with posts disapproving of the government's drone use and its suppliers. Last year, for example, Ethiopian activists disrupted an event in London promoting tourism to the UAE, and shouted slogans denouncing the country's delivery of drones to Ethiopia. On Facebook, a search for the Amharic language word for drone brings up mournful posts describing a specific massacre or graphic images of victims said to have been killed in strikes.

While drone attacks have been the most extensive in Tigray, such a search will reveal atrocities across the Amhara and Oromia regions too. In Amhara, fighters from the Fano rebel militia regularly release communiqués on social media, warning people in the region against gathering in large numbers or even using vehicles in certain areas to avoid attracting the attention of drones hovering in the sky. In the Oromia town of Bila, residents have described the impact of a deadly drone strike in 2022, saying that eyewitnesses and survivors have developed anxiety at the sight of aeroplanes in the sky. For some people in the town, loud sounds that are reminiscent of the unmistakable low, buzzing roar that the drones emit cause panic attacks.[3]

Despite claims by government officials that they are open to a mediated settlement in Oromia

and Amhara, drone strikes remain commonplace. Most recently, on February 14th this year, a drone strike killed three civilians including a pregnant woman and child in Amhara. And on February 20th, another killed 16 civilians in a residential district. The government rarely, if ever, publicly acknowledges the strikes, no matter how many casualties and how much domestic backlash they cause.

Drones and Ethiopia's foreign policy

America's darling

For decades, the West viewed Ethiopia as a bastion of stability in the strategically important Horn of Africa. Throughout the 2000s, Western countries funded and trained Ethiopian security forces and were somewhat muted in their criticisms of human rights abuses carried out by the Ethiopian regime. Washington in particular deemed Addis Ababa a critical ally in the fight against jihadist groups such as al-Shabaab in neighbouring Somalia and thus established close ties. Along with Rwanda and Eritrea, Ethiopia was one of three African countries to endorse the US invasion of Iraq and partner in its “war on terror”. Addis Ababa sent troops to Somalia in 2006 with US air support, while the US funded and trained Ethiopian troops and established an American drone surveillance base in southern Ethiopia.

While less involved than the US, the EU also partnered with Ethiopia on security issues—although neither sold drones to the country. The bloc was the biggest funder of the AU peacekeeping mission in Somalia, allocating some €2.7bn since 2007, which since 2014 has had a considerable representation of Ethiopian soldiers (from 3,000 to over 10,000 at different times). The UK has also funded between £13-15mn to the paramilitary Liyu Police, for “peacebuilding” efforts, despite accusations of human rights abuses.

With Ethiopians only knowing authoritarian rule for the entirety of their modern history, the whirlwind of political changes in 2018 instilled hope of a brighter future at home and in the West. Eager to support Abiy's promised reforms, the EU and the US went beyond their security partnerships and began investing heavily in Ethiopian democracy. The EU sent €16m to Ethiopian civil society organisations aimed at bolstering women's rights, democracy and media freedoms while other NGOs aimed to build the country's institutional capacity, and European media development agencies supported the local press scene.

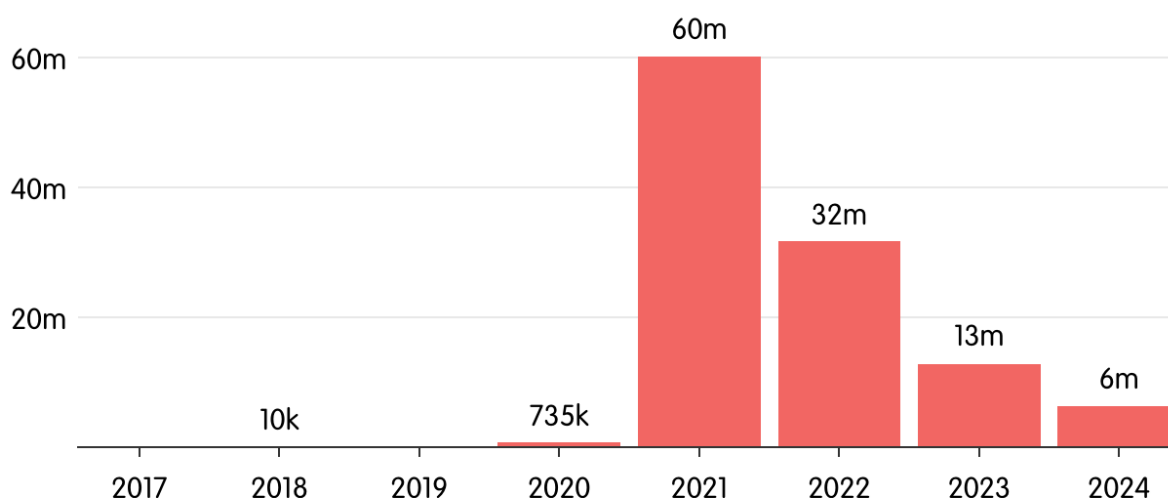
It started well. Ethiopia ended 2018 with no journalists in its jails, a first since 2004. For American and European officials, who for years had been on the receiving end of criticism for backing an autocratic Ethiopian government, a reformer was to be celebrated.

Drones and the drift from the West

When Ethiopia's wars in Oromia and Tigray broke out, things began to change. Addis Ababa's reliance on drones as a military tactic coincided with a turn in Ethiopia's foreign policy. Desperate to vanquish armed foes but unwilling to meet human rights requirements intrinsic to arms sales with many Western states, Ethiopia came to rely on the only states willing to supply drones: China, Iran, Turkey and the UAE.

Since early 2021, drone models produced by China, Iran and Turkey have been spotted in Ethiopian airfields, while deliveries have largely been facilitated by Emirati distributors. By mid-2021, these sightings soared, coinciding with the government counter-offensive in Tigray. In August that year, officials signed a defence agreement with Turkey centred on Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drone deliveries. Arrangements were also made to procure Iranian Mohajer and Chinese Wing Loong drones, which began appearing in satellite imagery. One open-source intelligence tracker documented 51 suspicious cargo flights to Ethiopia between September and October 2021—45 from the UAE and 6 from Iran. Come November, flights from the UAE had reached 90. By the end of the year, Turkish defence exports to Ethiopia amounted to a staggering \$60m, compared to nearly nothing the year before. [4] Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones cost around \$5m each and Chinese Wing Loong drones cost between \$1-2m. As a comparison, the fighter jets used by Ethiopia can cost between \$10m-40m, while military helicopters can cost anywhere from \$30m to \$1bn.

Turkey exports of arms, ammunition, and unmanned aircraft to Ethiopia. 2017-2024, in US dollars



Source: UN Comtrade
ECFR · ecf.eu

Western donor states gradually changed their tone. Citing reports by human rights organisations and the UN, EU and US officials began expressing fears that Ethiopia's wars were not the "law enforcement operation" that its officials were strenuously claiming. In December 2020, the EU suspended €88m worth of budgetary support earmarked for Ethiopia. Meanwhile, the US state department accused Iran of violating the UN Security Council Resolution 2231 with its transfer of drones to Ethiopia.

By continuing to commit a litany of atrocities in the wars in Tigray and Oromia, the Ethiopian government dealt the final blow to their ties with Western donor states. In March 2021, US secretary of state Antony Blinken accused Ethiopia and Eritrea of carrying out ethnic cleansing in Tigray. A US sanctions regime followed in September.

Addis Ababa reacted angrily to Western condemnation of atrocities and calls for restraint. Ethiopia's ambassador to the EU, Hirut Zemene, called on the bloc not to be "distracted by transient challenges" and downplayed suffering in the region. As the war went on, Ethiopia grew considerably more hostile to European calls to end the fighting. In response to appeals for a ceasefire from the government of Ireland in late 2021, Ethiopia expelled five diplomats from the Irish embassy in Addis Ababa.

Whether the Ethiopian government used drones or not, atrocities would have taken place in

its domestic wars. Indeed, many atrocities happened prior to the widespread use of drones became well known. However, unlike other weapons, drones make it easier for atrocities to be committed and make it harder to conceal them than, for example, summary executions. This can then provoke more immediate and severe condemnation from Western governments.

The Turkey factor

Turkey has an influential and well-documented role in supplying the Ethiopian government's war effort. A 2022 investigation by the *Washington Post* determined that munitions used in a drone massacre of 60 civilians were components of Turkish-made Bayraktar company products. Come December 2023, Haluk Bayraktar, CEO of Turkish drone manufacturer Baykar, was in the central Ethiopian city of Bishoftu, where the country's air force is based, to accept a national honour for "contributions to the development of Ethiopia's air force." Months later, reports emerged that Ethiopia had procured from Baykar newer Akinci model drones, which fly further and carry more bombs. Satellite imagery coordinates⁵ have since shown a drone hangar near Ethiopia's main air-force base designed specifically for storage of the new fleet. By the end of 2023, drones had ravaged war-torn communities in three of the country's regions.

Despite its heavy involvement in Ethiopia's wars, Turkey has largely managed to avoid backlash from the international community—even from its fellow NATO members. (The most pointed reaction came in December 2021 when the US reportedly privately expressed "discomfort" over the Ethiopian drone deliveries, in communications with Ankara.) The West's soft approach is largely due to Turkish drone manufacturer Baykar's large deliveries of its flagship Bayraktar TB2 drones to Ukrainian forces for use against Russia.

The drone has since been lauded as a Ukrainian symbol of resistance and Haluk Bayraktar has publicly vowed to never deliver drones to Russia. The critical importance of Baykar drones to Ukraine's military efforts have diminished the likelihood that Turkey would be publicly scolded by Western states for atrocities caused in Africa in case it had consequences on Ukraine. This is despite years of reports of the involvement of Bayraktar TB2s in civilian massacres across the continent.

The Kremlin's courtship

For Russia, the rift between Ethiopia and the West—alongside Ethiopia's closer ties with drone supplier countries—offered an opportunity. Russians were among the few diplomats who, while calling for peace in the Horn of Africa, would not denounce the Ethiopian government's

military efforts. Russian officials urged countries to “respect Ethiopia’s sovereignty” and played a critical role in preventing the UN Security Council from passing any resolutions that would have called for dialogue and restraint in Tigray. Moscow’s calls for peace in Ethiopia were coupled with calls for Western states to allow Ethiopians to solve their own “domestic” matters. Its diplomatic support delighted Ethiopian diplomats, who had found themselves isolated by former partner and donor states in the West.

Following the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow’s tone towards Western critics of Abiy’s war in Tigray became more aggressive. In July 2022, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov visited Addis Ababa and accused Western states of “meddling” in Ethiopian affairs. The minister virtually paraphrased his Ethiopian counterpart Demeke Mekonnen, who went on to thank Russia for “helping us in safeguarding Ethiopia’s sovereignty,” from the “colonial mindset” of his government’s critics.

At pro-government rallies in the Ethiopian capital in late 2021, Russian flags were commonplace among crowds lauding the military effort and accusing Western states of violating Ethiopian sovereignty. At the same time, while Ethiopia barred foreign journalists from reporting inside the country and arrested over 60 local journalists during the war period, the likes of RT and other pro-Moscow media outlets were allowed into the country to produce reporting that mostly toed a pro-Ethiopian narrative and criticised media and human rights organisations. Ties between Ethiopian state media and Russian outlet Sputnik have since tightened—a trend that does not bode well for public perceptions of the West if Russia’s similar actions in the Sahel are anything to go by.

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In the space of just a few years, Ethiopia has turned its back on its role as the Western-friendly peace anchor in the Horn of Africa. Few Western diplomats noticed the deteriorating signs (like the breakout of the Oromia war and the rollback of reforms) or tried to reel in Abiy until after the war in Tigray began and it was too late. Indeed, just a few years prior it would have been impossible to imagine Ethiopia turning to Moscow in this way. It had been strongly dependent on the West for humanitarian and military aid and was led by a Nobel Peace Prize winner who once said “I’d fight and die for America. The NSA [America’s National Security Agency] knows me.”

But Ethiopia’s determination to push on with its wars required support from states willing to turn a blind eye to the human rights abuses that earned it Western criticism. The government’s anti-Western rhetoric that followed has further alienated its former partners in a vicious cycle. Indeed, the solidarity from Moscow combined with the continuous flow of armaments

from non-Western countries likely emboldened Addis Ababa turning its back on the West as it became clear other options existed. Thanks to these countries, Ethiopia could fight its wars with no Western funding or weapons, and subsequently, without regard for human rights. By 2024, Ethiopia had become a BRICS member.

Drone diplomacy in Africa

As the wars in Ethiopia have shown, the proliferation of cheaply manufactured drones will change the way domestic conflict is conducted across the African continent. On the one hand, for authoritarian governments facing ethnic tensions and armed rebel groups, drones make a military response more appealing. They appear to offer a quick military victory over insurgents and guerilla fighters without costly, high-casualty ground operations into insurgent hotbeds and rebel strongholds. On the other hand, countries like China, Iran, Turkey and the UAE have what these governments want, and can use these sales to increase their soft power and their profits.

The term “drone diplomacy” refers to a country’s quick-fire drone sales with few preconditions in the hope of boosting their geopolitical influence. For Iran, for example, economic woes and crippling international sanctions have recently made its drone sales a much-needed source of money and influence. In the war in Sudan, Iranian drones played a key role in the Sudanese army’s gains against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) over the course of 2024. Besides the income, this has helped stifle the influence of other rivals including Saudi Arabia and UAE, the latter a key backer and supplier of the RSF.

China and UAE, on the other hand, have long had a military footprint across the continent, with sales of the Wing Loong drone to countries like Nigeria and Egypt dating back to 2011. And like other drone-merchant states, they have used it to expand their influence, counter the influence of their rivals, and gain access to raw materials and resources. The UAE continues to import Sudanese gold and a number of Emirati based RSF-linked gold mining companies were sanctioned by the US for helping the armed group procure weapons. And while China’s Wing Loong drone has served as a valuable asset to counter American influence in Africa, a Beijing-based analyst has also confirmed that Chinese drones have been bartered for African natural resources.

Turkey’s efforts, however, are the most striking example of “drone diplomacy”. As is the case in Ethiopia, drone sales have helped it to expand its soft power among many African clientele and become an active player in the continent. In the past two decades, Turkey has increased the number of its African embassies from 12 to 44, while its trade with Africa jumped from \$5.4bn in 2003 to \$34.5bn by 2021. While much of this is investment—Turkish companies were

involved in the completion of 1,864 infrastructural projects across Africa in 2023 alone—the country’s military outreach is sizeable and drones have become a core component. At least 15 African countries own Baykar drones or have expressed interest in buying them. By 2022, two years after the first Turkish drones were used in Ethiopia, Turkey had deployed military attaches to 19 African countries and established 37 military offices across Africa.

Turkey has signed a variety of military pacts in recent years, including with Ethiopia and Somalia, which severed bilateral ties last year over the former’s signing of a controversial maritime agreement with the breakaway territory of Somaliland. That dispute was resolved through the mediation by Erdogan, leading to an agreement to set up a mutually beneficial trade corridor granting Ethiopia sea access in exchange for it honouring Somalia’s sovereignty. With this new influence, Turkish firms are likely to be contracted to develop maritime infrastructure, likely leading to a semi-permanent presence at the trade corridor for years to come.

The purchase of Bayraktar TB2 drones has also begun to feature in the relationships between Sahelian states and Turkey following a wave of military junta-led coup d’états between 2022 and 2023. For the juntas, consolidating power and then dealing with the threat posed by jihadist movements including al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, and Boko Haram, creates an urgent demand for weapons that promise swift and decisive military action.

In this time, Sahelian relations with the West have frayed considerably. Burkina Faso and Mali have recently procured Turkish drones to combat local jihadist forces, arms sales which were facilitated by both Moscow and Ankara. Coinciding with anti-French sentiments prevailing across much of western Africa, Burkina Faso has embraced Russia as a defence partner, with foreign minister Karamoko Jean-Marie Traoré stating that Moscow was more “suitable” to work with than Paris. Moscow is unlikely to raise the issue of the 2023 killings of at least 60 civilians in multiple drone strikes in Burkina Faso.

As in Ethiopia, the criticism from Western states over the human rights abuses that followed aided the path to realignment. In late 2023, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger created the “Alliance of Sahelian States” and in early 2024 announced they were leaving the pro-Western regional bloc ECOWAS. Prior to the military rapprochement with Moscow, the US suspended Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali from its AGOA trade agreement over the coup d’états, likely encouraging their diplomatic shift eastwards.

Unlike the domestic conflicts destabilising Ethiopia, however, the Sahelian conflicts are more internationalised, with various actors driving a scramble to forge alliances with arms suppliers. This trend could spell deadlier and more protracted conflicts in the future. Further

north in Libya, for example, various political factions have procured armed drones from different foreign backers and spent years engaged in wars with each other.

However, drone-fuelled human rights abuses do not always bring Western condemnation, depending on the country's allegiances and those of its enemy. In Morocco, for example, Baykar last December set up a maintenance facility for drones it recently sold to Rabat. Drone attacks have previously been used by Moroccan government forces in Western Sahara, where Rabat has regularly faced challenges to its claim of sovereignty. In 2020, Morocco accepted an American offer to recognise Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed territory, in exchange for establishing diplomatic ties with Israel. Since 2020, Morocco has been accused of killing scores of civilians in drone strikes, claiming to be targeting members of the Polisario Front, an armed Western Saharan independence movement.

By early 2024, Morocco's drone fleet—which includes Turkish, Chinese and even Israeli drones—were linked to the deaths of 86 civilians since 2021. Unlike other African states, Morocco has faced almost no backlash from Western partners for human rights violations, with the country's normalisation with Israel likely to help mute any criticism. With Iran reportedly supplying the Polisario Front with drones, Western powers are likely to view Morocco's campaign in Western Sahara as necessary to nullify Iranian influence, no matter how much bloodshed it causes.

A troubling trajectory

The increasing influence of drone-supplier states is unlikely to steer the likes of Burkina Faso, Ethiopia or the warring parties in Sudan into exercising caution about the use of deadly air assets in civilian areas. This is the case even when such actions flout the terms of the UN's Arms Trade Treaty that stipulates states are to regulate the sale of weapons to countries with poor human rights records. Meanwhile, the growing profits and diplomatic influence across Africa gained by drone manufacturing and distributing states will ensure that the likes of China, Iran, Turkey and the UAE continue to pursue drone diplomacy.

With drone sales securing partnerships, allies and influence in the region, the long-term impact of “drone diplomacy” will be an increase in trigger-happy states with little incentive to pursue accountability for civilian deaths. The success of such “diplomacy” will open a path for more middle powers—keen on spreading their influence beyond their frontiers—at the expense of civilian populations residing in conflict-ridden and volatile regions. And as is the case in Ethiopia and the Sahel, closer links between drone supplier countries can generate Western condemnation for the crimes this allows African governments to commit, and in the case of Iran and China, for the company it leads them to keep. Ultimately, this drift from the

West only creates more opportunity for drone-suppliers and Moscow to pursue their own interests.

This worrying model of drone use in Africa will have severe repercussions for human rights and democratic freedoms across the continent. As the case of Ethiopia has shown, drones cannot secure quick victory. Rather, they increase the likelihood of drawn-out, deadlier wars. In the long run, drone use will leave untouched the underlying issues that force youths to take up arms in the first place. This can produce deeper resentment of governments among rebel groups, while wreaking havoc on the communities in rebel strongholds that are often caught up in strikes. At the same time, recurrent conflict exacerbates the economic woes of countries with meagre resources. Faced with condemnation and pressure to exercise restraint, governments at war tend to turn on critics, jailing journalists, human rights activists, expelling aid workers and rupturing ties with states and entities that threaten sanctions for such abuses, including the EU, the UN and the US. The end point of this sort of trajectory can be war-torn rogue states like Bashar al-Assad's Syria, isolated from the West and cosied up with Russia, with vulnerable populations fleeing elsewhere in the region and to Europe, desperate to escape the violence.

How to deal with the rise in drone warfare

The worrying impact of drone use on Ethiopia's wars and the country's foreign policy should be ringing alarm bells in European capitals. As the previous section details, the continuation of drone diplomacy in African countries will have a grave and long-lasting impact on the geopolitical, democratic and security trajectories of developing countries in Africa faced with ethnic tensions and violence from rebel groups. To deter drone use and its consequences, European diplomats have several policy tools available.

Keep talking

Maintaining a line of communication with drone-operating states is essential to avoid further isolation from the West, which would give ample room for Russia to expand its influence. The EU's current aggressive, robust approach to human rights violations by African governments has fuelled accusations of hypocrisy, with many across Africa taking note of the contrasting standards that Western states have upheld, particularly towards Israel's mass slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza. Severing ties and pushing for immediate isolation, the way France did following coups in the Sahel, could be interpreted by headstrong leaders as an attack on their country's sovereignty (especially when such policies are implemented by European countries with a history of invading African states and ousting leaders they fall out with).

Antagonising such leaders can help nefarious actors such as Wagner mercenaries gain a foothold in the region. Therefore, maintaining a channel for dialogue is critical. And there is still room for Europeans to do so. Despite the loss of European influence in recent years, most drone-operating states still value diplomatic relations with Brussels and European capitals as a critical source of investment and diplomatic support. Using this carrot to maintain direct communication with African governments is the first step towards stability and away from emboldened leaders unleashing mayhem from the skies upon their people.

Emphasising the link between peacefully resolving domestic wars and continued diplomatic support could also pave the way for collective mediation initiatives.

Enforce the law

There are precious few internationally recognised regulations or treaties that address the sale and use of cheap drones in countries with chequered human rights records. In theory, the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2013, prohibits signatories from selling drones and other armaments to countries known for deploying them against civilian populations. But with no enforcement mechanism, it is routinely violated by some signatories, including prominent drone supplier states China, Turkey and the UAE. Moreover, like other international disarmament treaties, including the 1996 Wassenaar Arrangement, the ATT was drafted long before drones became as ubiquitous, technologically advanced and deadly as they are today. It therefore lacks sufficiently strong enough language to address the proliferation of cheap drones and the worsening bloodshed they cause.

The EU has actively promoted the implementation of the ATT, going as far as providing financial support for states willing to ratify and fulfil treaty commitments. The bloc has made it mandatory for member states to adhere to the treaty and calls for wider international implementation. So far, however, this has not been enough. As the phenomenon worsens, European policymakers ought to consider drone-specific treaties that implement conventions encouraging greater scrutiny of their sales. While such treaties are unlikely to sway the likes of Iran and China from selling to problematic clients, it could help foster a culture of drone-related international norms that could dissuade states, including many of the 116 ATT signatories, from exacerbating the drone problem in Africa. Pursuing dialogue on ATT implementation with major drone-supplier Turkey, a state party to the Wassenaar Arrangement and a host of other disarmament-related, international treaties, would be worth the effort. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, of which Turkey is a member, could facilitate this.

Finally, to demonstrate serious commitment to global disarmament and convince sceptics in the global south that Europeans have a sincere interest in limiting the flow of deadly armaments, any such treaty would need to be universally applied. Therefore Europeans would also need to address Israel's widely documented and indiscriminate use of drones in Gaza and echo calls for an embargo.

Go straight to the source

Beyond legal routes, the EU should pursue other forms of engagement with key drone suppliers, especially Turkey. For its part, Turkey has increased its influence in the region, allowing it to play a direct role in mediating political disputes between Ethiopia and Somalia, which the EU welcomed. A subsequent offer by Erdogan to oversee mediation in the Sudan civil war was accepted by both the Sudanese army and the UAE (the financier of the opposing faction, the RSF). EU policymakers ought to highlight to Ankara that its peacemaker role across Africa is consistent with its African development and infrastructure policy. They should also reiterate the prominent geopolitical gains that come with peace, and emphasise that Turkey's supply of drones is counterproductive to its foreign policy efforts in regions like the Red Sea.

Europeans could also work to raise concerns with the UAE via the US, which recently designated the UAE a "major defence partner." Despite this, one of the final actions of the Biden administration was to declare the atrocities carried out by the RSF in Sudan as genocide. The Trump administration is now under pressure, including from American lawmakers, to block arms sales to the UAE. Abu Dhabi was likely disappointed by the outgoing Biden

administration's course of action and may be seeking to deter Trump from taking what it would view as drastic action against the kingdom. With its role in Sudan under increasing scrutiny, the UAE may be more willing to accommodate demands from its Western partners to regulate its drone sales.

Considering that Trump has openly threatened to hit BRICS states with tariffs, his administration could view curbing the distribution of drones a matter of interest if it can counter the influence of at least one BRICS member state such as the UAE. With this line of argument, the EU should strike while the iron is hot: the UAE has recently been open to the possibility of a ceasefire and appears eager to improve its reputation after a year of damaging reports on its activities in Sudan.

Only pay for progress

To address the situation in Ethiopia specifically, Europeans should first look to making their funding conditional on steps towards achieving peace. With swathes of northern Ethiopia now in ruins and millions of people displaced, Ethiopia can only go without Western support for long. Needing assistance with what it said was \$20bn worth of war-related damages as of August 2023, Addis Ababa has considerably toned down its anti-Western hostility. Its BRICS partners would be unlikely to foot the bill, especially in the wake of Ethiopia defaulting on its debts and given that much of these debts are owed to China.

The dire state of Ethiopia's economy is limiting Abiy's room for manoeuvre more than it has in the past when he pursued Western disengagement. The EU should make the most of this dependency. As part of its reengagement with Ethiopia, the EU has pledged €650m for 2024-2027 for rebuilding and democratisation. The conditions for the funding resumption, according to the European commissioner for international partnerships Jutta Urpilainen, were to "[agree] to a reform program with the International Monetary Fund", as well as achieving other "political conditions," which she would not publicly specify. As the EU disburses its payments it should make future instalments conditional on an end to continued fighting in Amhara, including the grounding of all drones. EU officials should also press their Ethiopian counterparts to allow journalists into the region, which would also allow for international monitoring of drone use.

Countries like France, whose president Emmanuel Macron spearheaded the reengagement process and from whom Abiy managed to secure €28m in investments, could lead the initiative—especially as France could use some closer African engagement. Italy, which has made closer African ties a foreign policy priority, could also be a useful vehicle for European engagement. There would be strong foundations to build on; during a visit to Rome in

February 2023, Abiy managed to secure loans and grants from prime minister Giorgia Meloni worth €182m.

At the same time, fresh atrocities in Amhara are the primary reason Ethiopia has not been reinstated into the lucrative African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) by the US since its 2022 suspension. With Ethiopia desperate for reinstatement, EU officials should urge the US to make AGOA membership contingent on Ethiopia agreeing to a moratorium on drone purchases and an end to war. This could appeal to the US as it would help limit the purchase of Chinese drones and could therefore dampen Beijing's influence in Ethiopia. At the same time, Ethiopia is seeking as much as \$10.5bn from international monetary institutions which would be critical to stave off economic collapse. However, it is unclear if human rights-related requirements have been integrated into negotiations—something Europeans should encourage.

Finally, the EU should be ready to learn from how making its funding conditional in Ethiopia can be most effectively applied to other countries similarly impacted by drone violence.

Bridge Ethiopia's divides

The AU continues to monitor implementation of the 2022 ceasefire agreement in Tigray. As the next step in its engagement with Ethiopia, European policymakers ought to explore the prospects of an AU-mediated dialogue that could also end the wars in Oromia and Amhara. Norway had played a direct role in facilitating failed peace talks in 2023 between the government and OLA rebels and could pick up where it left off. Norwegian mediators are well acquainted with the differences between the warring factions and thus best equipped to facilitate a resumption of face-to-face dialogue.

There is fertile ground for such an approach. Ethiopia's warring factions have all previously expressed an openness to resolving their differences through peace talks. They are not backed by superpowers preoccupied with their own interests, nor are they affiliated with larger global movements the way al-Shabaab or al-Qaeda are, nor like the warring parties in Libya, Morocco and Sudan. With established steps towards the peaceful resolution of Ethiopia's conflicts, the government could be more willing to limit its military spending and invest its resources on rebuilding infrastructure or on the health sector, in lieu of drones.

The EU agreed in 2022 to donate €33m to bolster efforts by UN agencies in Ethiopia to restore education services in war-torn areas that have seen schooling interrupted for years. However, drone strikes have targeted schools, killing teachers and pupils and contributing to grim figures from Amhara: as of late 2024, 4,000 schools were closed and four million students

deprived of schooling. An end to war and drone strikes are essential to the EU's investment in the education sector proving beneficial.

The future of conflict in Africa

Ethiopia entered 2025 a year and a half into its newest war in the Amhara region. Once again, the government's deployment of armed drones to the battlefield has been linked to massacres, killing at least 449 civilians in Amhara since 2023. Towards the end of last year, a leading Ethiopian colonel went on state media and announced that "the only language they [armed rebel groups] understand is force. From now on we will talk to them in that language."

Like its earlier wars, Ethiopian troops are bogged down fighting rebel fighters who have proven resolute. With the world preoccupied by conflicts in Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine, there is little bandwidth for addressing the burgeoning crisis in the Amhara region. Here worsening atrocities—including frequent drone massacres—cause region-wide carnage and starvation, and force growing numbers of the region's youths to either take up arms, or flee towards dangerous migrant corridors, exacerbating refugee crises in Libya and Yemen.

How the international community responds to drone use in Amhara is a sign of what is to come for wars in Ethiopia and across the African continent. With middle powers vying for influence and interests, there are growing numbers of eager suppliers for African governments keen to use the cost-effective weapons to dismantle rebel uprisings from the sky.

If drone distributors move beyond governments and begin shopping for clients among the litany of non-state armed actors operating across the continent, as is occurring in Morocco and the Sahel, the stability of entire regions could become a relic of the past. While drones are still mainly operated by internationally recognised states, policymakers should act. Despite claims by the likes of Baykar that its drones sales contribute to global peace, the last four years in Ethiopia are evidence that drones do not silence guns.

In Ethiopia's Amhara region, drone strikes continue to kill and maim everyone from medical staff to pregnant women, while perpetuating instability, democratic backsliding and the country's drift from the West. The recent sale of drones to other African countries should be cause for concern.

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[1] Author's calculation based on a tally of publicly listed compiled casualty figures, including the deaths of over 300 civilians throughout 2021 in Tigray listed by aid workers; the deaths of another 108 civilians in Tigray confirmed by the UN during a span of two weeks in January 2022; the reported deaths of at least 150 civilians from September-October 2022 in Oromia; and ACLED data listing 449 deaths in the Amhara region from August 2023 onwards. With accessibility, internet outages and underreporting rendering data collection across the country difficult, these are likely conservative figures.

[2] Author's interviews with two Ethiopian soldiers, September 2022, Gonder, Ethiopia

[3] Based on author's interviews with eyewitnesses, September 2022, Bila, Ethiopia

[4] Findings based on research by Wim Zwijnenburg, researcher and weapons expert with Dutch peace organization PAX

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