

The Century-Old USA-Ethiopia Wax and Wane Relationship and the Crisis in Tigray Region

By Mesfin Genanaw (Dr.)

"One always measures friendships by how they show up in bad weather"
--Winston Churchill



The relationship between the USA and Ethiopia dates back over hundred years when the two countries concluded a [Treaty of Commerce on December 27, 1903](#), by the representative of the



Republican US President Theodore Roosevelt and Ethiopia's emperor Menelik II after the emperor's conclusive victory against the Italian colonial army. The friendship started with President Roosevelt gifting two guns and a writing machine to the Ethiopian Emperor. The emperor reciprocated with a gift of two lions and two elephant tusks – the African way. With the exception of Liberia, founded by freed American slaves, and apartheid South Africa, emperor Menelik was the first black African leader to have forged diplomatic relation with the United States and even became a [heavy investor on American railway stocks](#).



The relationship blossomed during Ethiopia's longest-reigning Emperor, His Imperial Majesty (HIM) Haile Selassie, to the extent of sending his elite Kagnev Battalion – an over 3000 strong military to join the US military during the Korean war. Hundreds of Ethiopians either died or were wounded along with Americans at the Korean war. That alliance forged by blood reached its climax in His Majesty's six State visits to the United States from 1954 to 1973. The United States was one of the few powerful countries that refused to recognize Ethiopia's Italian attempted conquest in 1935. His international stature gained prominence among world leaders after Bridging the divide among newly independent African countries, forming the Organization of African Unity, and becoming its first President in 1963.

HIM's 2nd state visit and most colorful appearance at the White house and [tour with the Democratic President John of Kennedy](#) in 1963, just weeks before his unfaithful



assassination in Dallas, Texas was memorable. HIM came back to the Us for his funeral. The cordial relationship b/n the two countries seemed cemented with blood until the former Soviet Union armed Somalia with superior and vast military hardware to fulfill its long-standing dream of creating the **Greater Somalia** by unifying all ethnic Somalis in the region.

In 1969, HIM appealed to the United States about the imminent danger to his country from the heavily armed Soviet-backed Somalia that built a naval base at Berbera, Somalia. [Archives of the memo](#) of the man who once held both the posts of National Security Adviser and Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, to



President Nixon depicted the emperor's desperate appeal for help as "an exaggerated threat" and rejected the request. Kissinger's then "dismissiveness" of Africa's strategic value and the lessened strategic importance of the Kagnaw Station in Asmara; the fact that the Emperor assisted, equipped, and trained many African liberation fronts against colonialism and apartheid; his active membership to the "Non Alliance" movement; his unwillingness to make internal reform, and his decision to sever Ethiopia's relation with Israel in 1973 to appease the newly independent Arab countries in Africa did not bode well with some elements in the west.

Once seen as the most towering figure in Africa and beyond, HIM Haile Selassie became so weak internally that he was deposed easily from power by the Armed Forces Coordinating Committee known as the Dergue led by one of the low-ranking Colonels, Mengistu Hailemariam, in 1974. He used the weak Ethiopian military and the excesses of the feudal system as his rallying cause to depose and kill the emperor and many high-level officials mercilessly. However, as the emperor had feared, Somalia declared war against the politically unstable and drought-plagued Ethiopia in 1977, with three to five times superiority in tanks, artillery, MiG fighter jets, and other advanced weapons. Led by Soviet military advisors, Somalia occupied almost all Eastern Ethiopia within weeks. Despite the growing rift between the USA and Ethiopia over the human rights issue and Ethiopia's dropping off America's most favored list, Ethiopia's new dictator sent money to the longtime ally United States to buy weapons to defend the nation.



The newly elected Carter Administration withheld the money and rejected the request. President Carter's decision not to supply arms to Ethiopia when the Soviet-backed aggressor occupied its sovereign territory was considered by Ethiopians not just as a snub to Mengistu but as a betrayal of the Ethiopian nation-state. Ethiopians rallied behind dictator Mengistu to defeat the invading Somalian army. Angry at the denial, Mengistu Hailemariam, who had a communistic tendency, reversed course, and tried hard to woo China for help. Still, when that did not bring significant support, he headed to the superpower that supplied arms to his enemy - Moscow. Moscow, who was happy with the fall of America's staunch supporter, HIM, embraced the leader of the bigger fish in the Horn of Africa, gave him a crash course on Soviet communist ideology, and sent him back with more weapons and thousands of Cuba's militaries. The Soviet Union immediately awarded Ethiopia an [estimated \\$400 million military aid](#) - more than the United States had bestowed Ethiopia in three decades of an alliance. It also provided an estimated 11,000 Cuban troops and hundreds of Soviet military advisors and communist cadres.

Having let go, Ethiopia, an anchor country in the Horn with greater symbolic, geographic, and political influence in Africa, the Carter Administration made a 180 degree turn around and started new relation with Ethiopia's enemy, Somalia, at the insistence of wealthy Saudis who were willing to give hundreds of millions of dollars to Somalia to buy weapons to deter Soviet influences in the region. It was a dramatic moment in the cold war history for Ethiopia and Somalia to switch the long-lived alliances overnight. The former Soviet ally Somalia became part of the Western bloc, and Ethiopia became part of the Soviet bloc. Many had feared the Horn becoming another cold war flashpoint for a bigger war. Nonetheless, Ethiopia

defeated Somalia and quickly regained its lost territory. The Carter administration warned Ethiopia not to enter the proper Somalia territory to minimize its loss and prestige. The country that had long aspired to become "the Greater Somalia" ended up becoming a **great failed state** in the Horn for more than two decades. **The consequence of this instability eventually produced the al Shabab militia to power.** The USA continues to spend billions of dollars to fight the Al-Shabaab terrorist group in Somalia on top of American men and women in the military who lost their lives during the fight at Mogadishu in the 1990s. Had Presidents Carter and Nixon provided the requested military aid and purchase to Ethiopia, Somalia may not have dared to invade Ethiopia, destroyed herself, and the current Al-Shabaab problem would not have arisen in the first place. Incidentally, Sudan should also note this history as it has now become a hub for anti-Ethiopian elements to destabilize Ethiopia.

The Greater Tigray Project

The United States, after briefly supporting moderate but ineffective opposition parties operating outside Ethiopia against Mengistu Hailemariam unsuccessfully, it courted to power the brutal & tribal Albanian style communist, Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF), that claims to represent a mere 6% of ethnic Tigrayans in Ethiopia, and one that was listed as [Tier III terrorist organization under INA section 212\(a\)\(3\)\(B\)\(vi\)\(III\)](#) prior to its ascendancy to power in 1991.



Ethiopians were generally happy that the United States is mediating the outgoing government, TPLF, EPLF, and other opposition parties against Mengistu to form an all-inclusive transitional government trusting USA's long held belief in the territorial integrity of Ethiopia as a nation state. To the bewilderment of Ethiopians, at the London conference, the former US Assistant Secretary of State Herman Cohen recommended the advancing army of TPLF, led by Meles Zenawi, to enter Addis Ababa and EPLF, that captured Asmara right before the meeting, form a provisional government of Eritrea, ignoring the outgoing government and many other pro-Ethiopia opposition parties that were invited to the meeting. They were not even in the audience when this decision was made. As the result, Ethiopia became the most populous landlocked country in the world.

TPLF did not waste time to redraw Ethiopia's historical regions to its advantage along Ethno-linguistic lines (a la Mussolini's brief occupation of Ethiopia) to pit one ethnic group against another – the only sure way TPLF could stay at the helm of power. People are forced to put their ethnic identities on national ID cards, political parties are ethnic, and the redrawn regions are given ethnic names. While every Ethiopian culture should be nurtured, the new enclaves were designed to make people forget their shared Ethiopian identity and embrace only their differences. It made people feel like second-class citizens if the ethnic name of the ground they step on doesn't match with their language and ethnic lineage, whether they are born there or not– a sure way to destroy the social fabric of multi-ethnic Ethiopia. Except for language commonality, it is like redrawing the current states of the United States into the State of whites, blacks, Hispanics, etc., and expect the multi-ethnic Americans in each state live peacefully. Not only the new

ethnic regionalization is antithetical to a country that prides itself as the land of origin but also behind each ethnic governor appointed by TPLF, there were clandestine TPLF leaders at the other corner office ruling from behind using underhanded power. If this type of regionalization were to be exported to the rest of Africa, the continent would engulf itself in endless turmoil. It is like building up a shooting range inside a warehouse full of dynamite.

Maps of Tigray before and after 1991 and of the Greater Tigray

As the before and after 1991 maps show, TPLF forcefully annexed abutting regions from Wollo and Gondar (traditionally ethnic Amara dominated regions) bordering Sudan into Tigray proper to eventually fulfill another pipe dream in the Horn, "**The Greater Tigray Republic**," as stated in TPLF 1976 manifesto and in contravention of the rules and regulations of the African Union. Most ethnic indigenous Amhara landowners in these regions



Figure 2: Ethiopia's regional map before 1991

(mostly in Welkait, Tegedie, and Humera) were either pushed out or killed to make way

for new settlers from Tigray. Those who speak Amharic publicly were harassed or detained. A step-by-step plan was in the works to further encroach Gondar's [Ras Dashen Mountain and the UNESCO world heritage Lalibela church in Wollo, Benshangul, and Gambela](#) and a big chunk of Eritrea as part of the **Greater Tigray** project (see figure 3). Some of these expansions were already put in the Tigray map on children's 6th-grade

textbooks and some maps offered to UN researchers.

A couple of years after TPLF was anointed to national power, it pushed out its partner OLF, which it initially tried to keep as a strategic ally, to become the sole decision-maker in Ethiopia. Widespread atrocities were committed across the country, including Oromia, Amhara, Gambela, Somali, and Addis Ababa. In 2016 at the Oromo Irreecha cultural event alone, [hundreds of people were killed](#) following a stampede triggered by TPLF security forces' firing of live bullets against the crowd in response to their vocal opposition against TPLF.

In its heydays, TPLF became invincible. It owned the banks, the tanks, and the ranks (including key domestic and international positions), to do whatever benefits the Tigrayan elites and their allies across the country. But the struggle for freedom became so heated when the Amhara youth in Gondar and Gojjam joined the Oromo youth to put the country in a tailspin.



Figure 1: Tigray Region Map after 1991



Figure 1: The Greater Tigray Republic Concept Map

Dr. Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister

In 2018, nationwide demonstrations and the repudiation of the TPLF and its puppet EPRDF parties forced TPLF to concede power to internal reformers. Dr. Abiy Ahmed was elected by the EPRDF (after so much internal struggle) to become the new Prime Minister of Ethiopia despite enormous resistance by the don of the coalition, TPLF. But TPLF conceded power only temporarily with a secretive plan B and C to return to power. [An assassination attempt](#) was made against the Prime Minister at a public rally at Meskel Square. It was alleged TPLF planned the attempt using radical OLF operatives (known as OLA or OLF Shene). However, at that time, no mention was made about TPLF as it was part of the EPRDF coalition, and almost all high-level senior military officers were TPLF commanders. This was followed by [several soldiers marching to the national Palace](#) allegedly to kill the prime minister on October 16, 2018. When those attempts failed, TPLF made sure to pack its military officers to the top brass of the Northern Command in Tigray where up to 80% of Ethiopia's military arsenal is deployed with a hidden motive of executing Plan C – make the country ungovernable by financing ethnic strife around the nation, attack the Northern command, grab all of the heavy military arsenal and conduct insurrection against the Federal government, return to power and use article 39 of TPLF's constitution and create the **Greater Tigray Republic** after doing away the Ethiopian nation state.



US Policy to Ethiopia under Trump



The Trump administration arguably supported the easing out of TPLF from power in 2018 following the three-year unrest in the Oromo and Amhara regions. Until such a time, the GERD issue heated up, and his government patently favored Egypt; he was generally supportive of Ethiopia's transition to Abiy Ahmed's government. But later, his secretary of Treasury pressured Ethiopia publicly to enter into an agreement that he has drafted and restrict its inviolable right to use the Nile water, which it originates 85% of. Ethiopia rejected the proposal. Angry at the turn of events, just weeks before his election, Trump made a public comment that [Egypt would not be able to live with the dam and might "blow up" the construction](#). It may well be hot air, but that statement from the president pleased Egyptians and geared up many Ethiopian Americans to vote against him in mass during the last presidential election. US Census report shows there are nearly twice [Ethiopian Americans](#) in the USA who the former president could have angered than [Egyptian Americans](#) who would have been pleased by his statement. The relationship between the two governments went south after that comment, including withholding an allocated 130 million aid to Ethiopia. Most Ethiopian Americans were joyed that Biden won the election.

The Obama and Biden Administration



In many ways, the Biden Administration policy was a reset of the Obama administration after four years of intermission. Ethiopians were jubilated when Obama was first elected as President of the United States. However, when he visited Ethiopia in July 2015, after saying and doing all the right things, he made a serious lapse in his speech for a man known for choosing his words very carefully,



whether scripted or extemporaneous, that shocked the democracy hungry nation.

Ethiopians heard him say in their own capital that the Ethiopian government was "[Democratically Elected](#)". The fact that a sitting US president, leader of the free world, would give such a stamp approval to the TPLF government that jailed, tortured, and killed tens of thousands of innocent civilians, political prisoners, and journalists and terrorized the nation for decades and rigged elections (winning 100% of the seats) was a mockery of what "democracy" is all about. TPLF's ruthlessness was not unknown to United States, but this event gave a sign of how some of his former associates who now run the Biden's State Department were so close to the TPLF, to the extent of ditching the will of more than a 100 million democracy famished Ethiopians. Many Ethiopians now believe TPLF would not have conceded power without a bloody fight in 2018 had it been President Obama or President Biden in the white house because of their staff's close association with the TPLF.

Fast forward to November 4, 2020, [TPLF attacked the Northern Command headquarters](#) in Mekelle and bases in Adigrat, Agula, Dansha, and Sero in a coordinated mission. They killed hundreds of unsuspected non-Tigrayan Ethiopian National Defense force (ENDF) soldiers and commanders in their sleep and reportedly drove heavy truck on many to fulfill its plan C – seizing 80% of Ethiopia's military hardware and long-range missiles that it now uses to get back to power. These victims were national military personnel stationed in Tigray for over two decades, some of whom formed families with local Tigrayans. The attack by TPLF was admitted by a [former TPLF top spokesman](#) and confirmed publicly by former US [Secretary of State Pompeo](#) and former [Assistant Secretary of State Tibor Nagy](#). TPLF also [killed 1,564 Amhara civilians](#) (according to the latest count) in Mai Kadra town just days after their attack on ENDF. The attack was confirmed by Amnesty International and Ethiopian Human Rights Council. [UNICEF also reported that the TPLF forces killed 240 civilians, including 107 children](#) by attacking the Afar region - the only corridor through which food aid goes to Tigray and the route for all import-export shipments to the country at large.

Western Hypocrisy and the Media

Despite the stated reports of genocide and massacre by TPLF, at no point has the Biden administration or any western power condemned the attacked or called for the TPLF to lay down its arms nor any of the popular liberal media reported it. However, after the federal government gathered an army from around the nation and went on the offensive to subvert the insurrection and capture the leaders of TPLF, and defeated TPLF and controlled Mekele (the seat of the regional government) in three weeks, all hell broke

loose to stop the advance of the federal army by the USA, European powers, aid organizations and many liberal media outlets accusing the Abiy government of genocide and large-scale sexual violence with no solid evidence on hand. While attacks on civilians by all should be condemned, building a tendentious genocide case against the Ethiopian military and Amhara militia based on unsupported "evidence", half-truths, speculation, and subjective claims quoting "eyewitnesses" from TPLFites or territory fully controlled by TPLF or Ethiopian avowed enemies is not judicious. A recently [Leaked audio recording](#) of a March 26 United Nations agencies meeting reveals how the investigators feel the media sensationalizes the situation and even spreads allegations of mass sexual violence in Tigray with no evidence except for anecdotal references. To the extent these crimes have been committed by the Ethiopian army, the Abiy government should investigate the matter and take swift and decisive action against the perpetrators. The multiple attempts by the US and some allies to denounce the Ethiopian government at the UN security council of genocide and widespread violations was foiled by Russia, China, India, and some other countries. The western media and governments have muddled supporting the Tigrayan people with supporting the criminal TPLF that caused their sufferings. Even images of children carrying automatic guns were portrayed as brave fighters for freedom.

Even though some media have now begun making false equivalence, the West's selective outrage and call for negotiation when the Abiy government takes the upper hand to defend the insurrection and the complete stillness when TPLF commits egregious crimes on civilians and children has become too frequent. Ethiopians now feel the well-coordinated call for "human rights," and denunciation of the federal government has a different agenda. Even though it might have worked to isolate Ethiopia from the west and some of its neighbors, it has backfired and awakened the always cautious Ethiopian public from within to fall in line with the prime minister like never since the start of the Tigray conflict.

In fairness, the US and other partners in Europe have provided a huge amount of development and food aid to needy Ethiopians for many years and continue to do so. But the [food aid sent to civilians are being stolen by TPLF](#). TPLF has a history of [siphoning aid money to buy weapons](#). In the current TPLF induced crises, the West has totally lost credibility to mediate the dispute by shaming and bombarding the Abiy government and his military by well-funded media outlets in a coordinated fashion. The negative framing of government's action has emboldened TPLF and resuscitated it from the dead and provided moral support to expand deep into the Afar and Amhara territory using child soldiers to execute its scorched-earth warfare against innocent Amhara and Afar farmers and their children. Multiple western media visibly seen in Tigray were nowhere to be seen in Amhara and Afar regions where millions are now dislocated and schools, hospitals, shops, and residences were ransacked and looted in thousands.

Is PM Abiy Going Against the Western Interest?

Officially, PM Abiy Ahmed continues the neo-liberal philosophy of his predecessor TPLF, though the latter was a kleptocracy, and still supports the US security umbrella provided by AFRICOM and AMISOM. In May 2021, Abiy's government awarded its first big project and first telecom license to the US and Europe-funded consortium of Safaricom, Vodafone, and Vodacom to build an \$8bn network in the country over

the next decade. These facts show his commitment to expanding private investment and Ethiopia's outsized participation in the anti-terrorist operation in Africa which is in line with western interest. No visible Chinese investment was made since Abiy came to power. The recently held election was relatively better than TPLF's "election" during the last 30 years in giving some space to most opposition parties. Given those facts, one wonders why the Biden administration and other western governments are so animated to favor the TPLF in this conflict ignoring their strategic alliances with Ethiopia? It may well be (1) TPLF's strong and long personal association with the US and European governments, the international media, donors, and aid agencies (2) Egypt and powerful Arabs lobby of the US administration to weaken Ethiopia and push her to sign unfair Nile water agreement with Egypt and Sudan (3) Ethiopia's inability to match the well-funded campaign discrediting its government and its development goals (4) to deflate this proud and unyielding Nobel laureate pan Africanist leader or replace him with a more malleable leader to western interest. Or it could be some combination of the above reasons and not yet known factors. But western governments should know that had TPLF won in its insurrection in November 2020 in its desire to create the Republic of Tigray and disintegrate this ancient, proud nation, Europe and neighboring countries would have millions of displaced refugees at their doorsteps. The west can support civilian victims in Tigray and other places without supporting the criminal TPLF to destabilize the Horn of Africa.

Ethiopian Americans

Like Ethiopians in the homeland, the Biden administration's Ethiopia policy has turned off many Ethiopian Americans around the United States. They see his policy mirrors President Carter's mistake of pushing Ethiopia to the East after almost five decades. An estimated one million three-generation Ethiopian Americans are in the United States though the official census shows lower than this number. The overwhelming majority of Ethiopians support the democratic efforts underway in Ethiopia over the TPLF that ruled the country for 27 years (as a liberation front) with brute force using a divide and conquer strategy. Ethiopian Americans are currently re-thinking the support they have lavishly given to Democrats for decades. Like Cuban Americans, Jewish Americans, and many others, most Ethiopians are single-issue voters on homeland matters. America's Ethiopia-policy trumps everything. Their votes could make a significant difference in battleground states like Georgia, Colorado, Nevada, and Virginia in the coming elections in the United States.

The Biden Administration's desire to form the much-publicized transitional type of government of hodgepodge self-appointed ethnic elites including TPLF by flouting the votes of 38 million Ethiopians who voted in the recent election shows the shaping of foreign policy through the prism of favored foreign leaders than voters' interest on the ground. Looking back into history, the 16th American president, Abraham Lincoln, ordered his militia and federal army to suppress the Confederate army that opened fire on the federal garrison at Fort Sumter in Charleston Bay on April 12, 1861, to stop the insurrection. This event triggered the civil war b/n American people over differences in the moral and economic value of slavery. President Lincoln's administration and most of the Northern American people refused to recognize the legitimacy of secession for fear that it would discredit democracy and would eventually fragment the United States into several small, squabbling countries. Ethiopia is facing a far worse situation

with the TPLF confederate army's hegemonic aspirations. Regrettably, the administration of the 46th American president and western allies have condemned the defending federal government of Ethiopia at the Security Council eight times, with no denunciation of the TPLF confederate army that openly vowed to destroy one of the oldest countries in the world, the symbol of independence for people of black descent, and an ally of the United States. But the Ethiopian people had always risen in unison to defend their nation, and this time would not be an exception.

To judge the heartlessness of TPLF against its own people, one must look at how a third of Tigrayans, close to two million people, lived under a safety net aid program from the international community for decades, and why most households, schools, and health institutions in Tigray lack water and basic sanitation facilities. At the same time, it was the sole decision-maker in the country for twenty-seven solid years. TPLF is now forcing these helpless Tigrayans in the safety net program (maybe intentionally kept there to be used someday) and under-age children to fight its war against their fellow countrymen to the south.

TPLF and its elites owned most of Ethiopia's modern economy through the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), EFFORT, Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT), and hundreds of its parastatal companies exempted from taxes. Even though there were disproportionate expansions in industrial and commercial activities in Tigray benefiting the elites, these multibillion-dollar conglomerates were used to embezzle billions of dollars in the name of the suffering Tigrayans. According to Transparency International, [an estimated average of US\\$1.3 billion to US\\$3.2 billion dollars left Ethiopia as IFFs every year](#) when they were at the helm of national power. The control of enormous power and money by this narrow ethnic organization allowed it to plug in its members and kins as experts in key positions on major international organizations and rub elbows with high-level officials in western governments, the international media, and even in academia who now vouch for TPLF as a victim instead of a cause for the death and destruction of millions in the country. Some of these experts and donor countries have been caroling Ethiopia's "double-digit" growth under the TPLF to rebuff the growing demonstration against it and the increasingly unaffordable cost of living and survival of the average citizen.

Ending the Crisis in Tigray

War destroys communities and families and disrupts the fabric of a nation. The people of Ethiopia are being bled dry by this devastating war and all of us should be ashamed of it. But TPLF started this war by attacking the northern command of the federal army (violating what many would consider the eleventh commandment) after preparing for it for three years. No nation on the planet would tolerate this reprehensible action no matter how many people support it. TPLF can't stand being equal, let alone live as a junior partner proportionate to its representation in the future Ethiopia. Three generations of Ethiopians have suffered from the civil war started by TPLF, and negotiation is not in TPLF's DNA. Many elders and religious leaders, including the patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox T. Church, had begged them to negotiate with the government before the war started. Some mothers have cried on the leaders' feet. But its ignorance is only exceeded by its enormous hubris. From its inception with its 1976 hegemonic manifesto, TPLF only used negotiation to buy time for the opportune moment to strike back. It did it with

TLF, OLF, Shabia, and many others. Hundreds of thousands of young men and women, including children, may have died with TPLF's reckless adventure since its inception.

Currently, Ethiopia has been pushed by the USA, EU, and international organizations beyond a point where it doesn't care about them anymore. After all, a country develops only when self-reliant, peaceful, and not susceptible to outside interference. The diehard supporters of TPLF need to know the era of Tigrayan outsized influence on Ethiopian politics is over. But millions of ordinary Tigrayans live outside Tigray region and no other people or country cares more about them than people with whom they shared history, identity, and culture for the millennia. TPLF has set fire against all ethnicities around the nation (in the name of the Tigray people) not to be accountable for its atrocious crimes. For this war to end and become lasting, TPLF must stand down and lay down its arms. Dialogue must start between genuine elders on both sides to deescalate the tensions and heal the wounds. The people of Tigray should be free to elect whoever leads them. I believe no free man or woman elects his/her oppressor - at least in the long run - if the fear of retaliation is lifted from their heads.

The writer can be reached at mgenanaw@yahoo.com