

Conflict Research Programme Research Memo

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Inter-ethnic violence in Ethiopia's Somali Regional State, 2017 - 2018

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This research memo reviews two recent inter-ethnic conflicts in the northern part of Ethiopia's Somali Regional State (hereafter: SRS). The first between the Gerri and Jarso provides a window into complicated Oromo-Somali relations, which had spiralled into full confrontation by the end of 2017. The second case is more short-lived, consisting of targeted violence against highlanders or *habeshi* in Jigjiga by Somali youth gangs on 4 August 2018. Although different in nature, both examples point to the need to understand inter-group relations historically, the way in which shifts in national politics impact on local ethnic politics and how leaders capitalise on political uncertainty to further their agenda with violent means. Ethnic federalism, which ties defined ethnic communities to particular territories proves to be a volatile constitutional construct during political transition.

Introduction

Inter-ethnic conflicts have [been on the rise](#) in Ethiopia since 2018. Ethiopia's Somali Regional State (SRS) is no exception to this trend. Although almost exclusively inhabited by ethnic Somalis, inter-ethnic strife has repeatedly occurred in SRS since its creation in the early 1990s. Most inter-ethnic disputes have been at the regional border with Afar and Oromiya. Disputes between the [Afar and the Isse](#) in Shinille zone or between various Somali and Oromo communities in Moyale, Mieso, Babile and other places have repeatedly flared up in the past three decades. Most of these conflicts emerged as a combination of [resource conflicts and political issues](#), which are closely intertwined in the Ethiopian lowlands.

Inter-ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia can be classified into two broad groups. *First* are conflicts centering on administrative boundaries, typically regional state, district or sometimes *kebele* boundaries. *Second* are disputes between minorities who have become the hosts of ethnic majorities in a political system that puts a premium on ethnically defined polities. Both types of inter-ethnic conflict invite political entrepreneurs who mobilise collective identities strategically for political gain. Both have the potential to escalate tremendously if and once they are driven by broader national political processes. Both include [processes of boundary making](#) that may 'harden' or 'soften' ethnically defined identification.

Much of this research memo focuses on recent inter-ethnic disputes in the northern part of SRS. In particular it provides a short history and account of the evolving Gerri-Jarso conflict and the one-day pogrom against 'highlanders' in Jigjiga on 4 August 2018. The memo draws on both primary and secondary sources collected by the two authors.

Somali-Oromo conflicts

Somali and Oromo communities share a 1400 km border between Moyale at the Ethio-Kenyan border to the south and Mieso district in West Hararghe zone to the north. This multi-ethnic corridor is best understood as a [cultural frontier](#) in which Oromo, Somali, Somali-Oromo or Oromo-Somali groups interact, coexist and compete over natural and other resources. Ethno-nationalist narratives gloss over the complexity of existing inter-clan ties between, for example, the Gerri, Jarso, Garre or Gabra communities. Government officials often struggled to comprehend how one group could [claim the genealogy of another group](#).

In pastoral areas boundaries – for instance between the Borana and Garre – shifted in response to seasonal mobility and evolving resource use. Before 1991 conflicts between Oromo and Somali groups were often localised. They revolved around territorial competition or disputes over dry grazing-areas and water points. Intensive ethnic warfare such as the 1940 Boran-Garre conflict in the Liban area were rare. During much of the Derg period the attitudes of mixed Somali-Oromo communities converged. They shared a status of Muslim lowlanders marginalised by the political centre. The Somali government of Siyad Barre sought to capitalise on this dynamic by funding the [Somali Abo Liberation Front \(SALF\)](#) representing Muslim Oromo insurgents – although some Oromo groups like the Boran sided with the Derg.

Ethnic federalism and the redrawing of administrative boundaries by the EPRDF [changed inter-group dynamics](#) between and among Somali, Oromo and mixed Oromo-Somali groups. Ethnonational principles ran counter to multi-ethnic fluidity and flexible resource boundaries. Inter-ethnic solidarity largely disappeared after 1991 as groups had to identify with either the Oromiya or the Somali Regional State. For instance, the Garre decided to embrace a Somali identity while the Gabbra appear to be divided. Where Somali and Oromo groups co-existed or were close neighbours, competition over territory and *kebeles* gained new momentum. Most importantly, what once were local resource disputes between neighbours effectively turned into conflict between Oromiya and the Somali Regional States. This allowed local leaders and ethno-national entrepreneurs to enlist 'their regions' in the struggle against their former neighbors and adopted relatives.

The [2004 referendum](#) was devised to resolve these – part inter-ethnic, part boundary – disputes affecting some 30 districts in both regional states. Initiated by the House of Federation and implemented by the federal National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), the inhabitants of 422 *kebele* along the Oromo-Somali border voted on their preferred regional state. Consequently, 323 *kebele* were assigned to Oromiya and 93 *kebele* to Somali Regional State. The referendum could not be held in Moyale.

The 2004 referendum assigned the disputed localities to the two regions, but it [did not bring peace](#) between Somali and Oromo groups. It achieved stabilisation in the short-term, but in the longer term it further separated communities and complicated inter-ethnic relations. Some four years later the Garre and Borana were involved in warfare that claimed the lives of some 300 persons and led to massive displacement during the [dry season of 2008](#).

The continued volatility of Oromo-Somali relations [became clear in 2017](#) when clashes along the regional boundary spiralled into mass killings and displacements on both sides. [By mid-2018 over one million persons had been displaced](#). Both Oromos in SRS and Somali in Oromiya had to flee to their respective home state for safety. The rapid escalation of this conflict was not the sole outcome of inter-ethnic animosities. The conflict involved the regional administrations and security forces of both Oromiya and Somali Regional States. For instance, the SRS' [liyu police were accused of killing over hundred Oromo](#) during incursions into Oromiya in February and March 2017. Both regional states spread propaganda and misinformation to mobilise their community. Former SRS president Abdi Mohamed Omar 'Iley', in particular, had an interest in stoking conflict with Oromiya at the time of the mass Oromo protests. The large-scale displacement of the Oromo was effectively used by Oromo officials such as former Oromiya regional president and current Minister of Defense, Lemma Megersa, to consolidate their position in national politics. Fearing a stronger Oromo role in the lucrative cross-border trade Abdi 'Iley' tried to weaken Oromiya. This was also in the interest of some elements within the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) whom Oromo protestors accused of abuses and corruption.

Competition between Gerri and Jarso

Conflicts between the Gerri (sometimes also spelled Girhi) and Jarso illustrate the complexities of Somali-Oromo relations under ethnic federalism. Straddling the border between eastern Hararghe in Oromiya and Fafen zone in SRS close to the regional capital Jigjiga, the Gerri-Jarso are agro-pastoralists

who mix '[Oromo farming techniques](#)' with '[Somali social institutions](#)'. The Gerri and Jarso are [closely intermarried](#). The numerically stronger Jarso have for long been subordinated to the Gerri. The latter consider themselves more 'noble' as they trace their genealogy to the Darood clan family. Perceptions about the Gerri-Jarso's collective identity are contested by both insiders and outsiders and by Oromo and Somalis alike. For a long time, Somalis viewed both as Somali, considering conflicts between the Gerri and Jarso as an intra-Somali affair. But in the eyes of members of the Absame lineages (who are part of the Darood clan family), these same conflicts were part of an inter-ethnic confrontation between Somali (Gerri) and Oromo (Jarso).

Given this complex mixture of intermarriage and hierarchy, competition over land and political dominance have been part of the centuries old Gerri-Jarso compact. These struggles intensified whenever one group attempted to use changing political conditions to challenge or reassert its counterpart. A major conflict that caused considerable damage to both communities occurred around Tulli Guled, some 40 km from Jigjiga, in 1982 and 1983 and lasted up to 1985. This war forced thousands of families to flee and disrupted the social fabric of the Gerri and Jarso.

Another massive conflict erupted in 1992 in the early days of the former ruling coalition – the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). This was a time when EPRDF forces had not yet secured a monopoly of violence in the eastern parts of the country. [It lasted up to nine months and claimed some 700 lives](#). Former soldiers of the Somali and Ethiopian army took part in the fighting. The Jarso eventually won and took control of Chinaksen and Quochoer areas. Initially the Jarso sought recognition with the administrative structures of the SRS. They established their own party and joined the Ethiopian Somali Democratic League (ESDL) in 1994. Until 1995, Chinaksen was neither fully incorporated into Oromiya nor Somali Regional State. Eventually the Jarso reached an agreement with EPRDF and Chinaksen became part of SRS in 1994.

Peaceful relations between the Gerri and Jarso prevailed between the 1992 conflict and the 2004 referendum. But many Jarso felt neglected and marginalised within the SRS whose politics favoured numerically stronger Somali kinship groups like the Ogaadeen. By the time the 2004 referendum was held a good number of Jarso dominated areas, including localities inhabited by Hawiye, decided to vote for Oromiya region. Their expectation was that Oromiya would provide better services and more significant political opportunities to the Jarso. The competition between Oromiya and Somali Regional States over its border communities led some Jarso to embrace a distinctly Oromo identity – a move destined to undermine Gerri domination and to reclaim farmlands.

Some 88 *kebele* in Jigjiga zone took part in the 2004 referendum. 43 *kebele* voted for Oromiya and 40 decided to remain in SRS. This led to divisions among the Jarso as some had opted for Oromiya while others preferred cohabitation with the Gerri within the SRS. [Chinaksen district became part of Oromiya regional state](#). The Gerri lobbied SRS political leaders, in particular fellow Darood, to speak on behalf of their interests by accusing the Jarso – including those who remained within SRS – of being Oromo. Again, a key motivation for this was to claim control over farmland. Gerri and other Somali clans in Jigjiga considered the outcome of the 2004 referendum as nothing short of an Oromo theft of Somali owned territory.

Former SRS president Abdi 'Iley' (2010-2018) made himself the spokesperson of Somali ethno-national interests within Ethiopia. He portrayed the Jarso as invaders bent on taking Somali farms and lands. In 2016, he nominated Tulli Guled – where most Jarso within SRS live – as a district. But he deprived the Jarso of appointments in the new district, instead appointing Gerri individuals to most offices. This provoked violent clashes between the Gerri and Jarso during which the SRS *liyu* police sided with the Gerri. The [liyu police](#) was also reported to have supported the Gerri in clashes in Chinaksen in September 2017 as well as other localities on the Oromiya side in July 2018. [Oromo security forces](#) reciprocated by attacking Somalis in Tulli Guled in August 2018.

The new SRS president Mustafa Mohammed Omar visited Tulli Guled district in November 2019 with the aim of reaching out to the Jarso. However, he failed to nominate a peace committee tasked with conflict resolution which would have paved the way for the return of displaced Jarso to their farms. At the time of writing, the conflict between the Gerri and Jarso within SRS was thus still in need of

resolution. The new SRS administration has been much more cooperative towards Oromiya regional state than its predecessor. It no longer pursues a one-sided support of the Gerri, making a peace deal between the Gerri and Jarso possible.

Somali and *habeshi* interactions

Conflict between Somali and 'highlanders' have a long history in eastern Ethiopia. Somalis often refer to the latter as 'Amhara' or *habeshi*, even though they include a varied group including Amhara, Oromo, Gurage, Tigray and others. The most recent conflict incident was the anti-*habeshi* violence of 4 August 2018, during which Somali youth gangs [killed some 60 persons](#), all non-Somali, in the regional capital Jigjiga. This pogrom was accompanied by the destruction and looting of shops and the burning of several churches. What led to this sudden outburst of anti-highlander violence?

Because of the [forced incorporation of the Ogaden](#) into the Ethiopian empire, Somalis have long identified Christian Amhara or Amhara speaking groups as the 'ethnic opposite'. In reality, relations between Somalis and *habeshi* in SRS reflect changing historical power relations in Ethiopia's Somali periphery. To this day, Jigjiga's settlement patterns echo its origin as a garrison town. The northern part of town, *kebeles* 4, 5, and 6 in particular, are or used to be predominantly inhabited by 'highlanders' while the remaining parts of town are Somali dominated. If this geographical divide reflects the town's [military and social history](#), a demographic and political reversal occurred over time. In the mid-1980s, more than a third of Jigjiga's population was classified as 'Amhara' and about a quarter was Somali. By the time of the 2007 census, Jigjiga's Somali population had reached [57 per cent](#). Given [rapid demographic growth](#) and rural migration this share is likely to be between 60 and 70 percent today. Undoubtedly, the 'Somalisation' of Jigjiga reflects shifting state formation dynamics in the Ethio-Somali frontier.

During the imperial period and the Derg, the Amhara speaking *habeshi* population enjoyed state backing and a higher social position compared to the indigenous Somali. This changed with the federalisation of Ethiopia after 1991. As Somalis in Ethiopia obtained [self-administration within the SRS](#), they replaced highlanders as the new political elite. They also reclaimed properties lost after fleeing Ethiopia in the wake of the 1977/78 Ogaden war. Amhara and Amharised 'highlanders' turned into a minority. They gradually lost their administrative positions in the local and regional government, including clerical appointments. Informants identified the [Business Process Reengineering](#) (BPR), a wide ranging civil service reform that began in the late 2000s, as a moment when *habeshi* were forced out of SRS's public administration. Some went into the private sector, including informal trading, while other joined the newly established Jigjiga University.

At the popular level, 'Amhara' settlers and other non-Somali town dwellers and Somali inhabitants look back to over a century of co-existence in Jigjiga. Everyday cultural, economic and political interactions between the two groups complemented – but did not fully erase – the original colonial relationship between the two. Historically, neighbourly relations were built around barter between Amhara agriculture and Somali pastoralism, joint payment of *diya* or blood money, contra-band and cross-border trading, and the adoption of Somali lifestyles including *khat* chewing by highlanders. Jigjiga allows for relatively easy access to trade and business opportunities for outsiders, which explains its ongoing attractiveness.

[Over the 20th century inter-ethnic relations waxed and waned](#). They improved steadily from circa 1900 to 1950, deteriorated after the advent of Italian and British colonialists (who had sided with the Somali), worsened during harsh rule by the Derg when Jigjiga was spatially segregated, and again improved after regime change in 1991. Over the century a *modus vivendi* – a combination of segregation and cultural tolerance – had developed between Somalis and non-Somalis in Jigjiga. In business, an [ethnic stratification](#) involving Amhara, Gurage and Oromo labourers and traders at the bottom of the value chain and Somali traders and political brokers at the top of the value chain emerged in Jigjiga and other major towns of SRS. Ethnic federalism did turn *habeshi* in Jigjiga into secondary citizens, but overall they enjoyed friendly relations with their Somali neighbours.

The Jigjiga pogrom of 4 August 2018

Former SRS president Abdi 'Iley' did not have a particular pro or anti-*habeshi* agenda when he came to power in 2010. However, his tenure and some of his policies – namely his policy of [convincing the diaspora and returnees](#) to support the government – led to an increase of Somali residents and homeowners in Jigjiga. Somalis began to buy more property in the *habeshi* dominated *kebeles* of town. But for the most part of Abdi 'Iley's reign, highlanders were spared from the contentious politics that pitted the president's [supporters against his opponents](#). This changed when the Somali-Oromo conflict escalated at the end of 2017. Abdi 'Iley' had allied himself with the TPLF wing of the EPRDF in the 2015 to 2016 [protests in Oromiya and Amhara regions](#). By the time Oromo were evicted from SRS in September 2017, Abdi 'Iley' had taken up an ethno-nationalist Somali rhetoric aimed against non-Somali whom he depicted as foreign oppressors out to steal Somali lands.

When Abiy Ahmed, an Oromo, became the new Ethiopian Prime Minister in April 2018, Abdi 'Iley's political fortune turned. After years of repression he faced concerted opposition from within SRS. His role in the Somali-Oromo conflict and his continued [alliance with TPLF military and political leaders](#) irritated the new federal government. The new leadership soon asked Abdi 'Iley' to step down from the SRS presidency. Under pressure from all sides, he held a [bizarre speech in regional parliament](#) in July 2018 in which he blamed the TPLF for the rights abuses his administration had committed in the region. At the end of July a major political gathering of Isse, Jidwak and other politicians, activists and elders met in Dire Dawa, calling for political reform and for Abdi 'Iley's dismissal. This was the first time that opponents of the regime organised publicly to defy the regional president's reign of terror. The federal government tacitly supported the Dire Dawa conference. Abdi 'Iley' realised that his days were numbered.

It is in this context of imminent downfall that the SRS leadership resorted to ethnic incitement and violence – a deliberate and desperate ploy to demonstrate 'Somali' power *vis-à-vis* the federal government. Some 10 days before the anti-*habeshi* pogrom of 4 August, Abdi 'Iley' held a speech in the presidential compound, warning that he 'would turn Jigjiga into Mogadishu' (or, turn Jigjiga into a situation worse than Mogadishu). His Minister of Finance and Economic Development, Ahmed Abdi Mohamed 'Ilkacase', posted a [Facebook message](#) denouncing the Prime Minister, Oromos and federal troops who had been sent to SRS to capture the president as enemies of the Somali people. He called upon the *heego* and the public at large to 'defend the region'. A little later on the same day, groups of young Somali men – the *heego* – began roaming the streets of Jigjiga, attacking and killing non-Somalis, looting shops and burning churches. This sudden outburst of violence against long-time Jigjiga residents shocked locals and observers abroad. The exact number of victims of the 4 August pogrom is hard to establish. Abdi 'Iley' and 46 co-conspirators were [accused by a federal court](#) of killing 59 and injuring 266 civilians, as well as destroying property.

Like [ethnic riots around the world](#), the Jigjiga pogrom was not a spontaneous outburst of popular sentiment, but had been planned beforehand. The *heego* militia were a state sponsored youth group, which was organised by the regional youth bureau. The latter oversees the SRS chapter of the Ethiopian Youth Federation, a government sponsored programme facilitating youth involvement in development. The *heego* groups thus acted upon Abdi 'Iley' and regional leaders' instructions when they attacked non-Somalis on 4 August 2018. The *heego* might have been established around May 2018. They were a response to the [Oromo qeero](#), which had dominated protests in Oromiya and were part of the Somali-Oromo conflict, including [attacks on Somalis in eastern Oromiya](#) in late 2017. The *heego* – the name of which can be loosely translated as 'harbinger of rain' or 'being on the rise' – were created as a government affiliated youth militia that could be used against domestic opponents and ethnic outsiders.

According to one informant *heego* members came predominantly from rural areas and were armed with traditional tools. Many came from Marsin and its environments, the hometown of Abdi 'Iley', which is close to Degehabur. The *heego* were not limited to Ogaaden membership. They included youth from other major local clans. The Jigjiga branch of the *heego* was dominated by Gerri and Jidwaq persons. The Gerri's conflict with the Oromo-leaning Jarso meant that they could be motivated against Oromos in Jigjiga. The Dire Dawa branch of the *heego* was dominated by Gurgure who had a longstanding conflict with the Isse (who in turn opposed the Abdi 'Iley' administration). In Liban, the Garre made up the bulk of the *heego* chapter as they were heavily involved in clashes with the Boran in the Moyale area. For the SRS government the *heego* were a useful tool that served both parochial, intra-SRS political aims, as well as the broader anti-Oromo agenda.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that most victims attacked by the *heego* groups were concentrated in the *habeshi* dominated parts of the regional capital. In the more mixed neighbourhoods Somali residents were often able to protect their Amhara (and other highlander) neighbours, sending the gangs away. *Habeshi* owned shops in the downtown area were also targeted and ransacked. While the *heego* and, according to some sources, some *liyu* police, created havoc in Jigjiga, Abdi 'Iley' oversaw operations from the top floor of centrally located [ZM International Hotel](#). When [federal security forces](#) approached to take over key positions in Jigjiga, he ordered his supporters to stop. On the following day, August 5, the security situation remained tense and limited looting continued. Non-Somalis who had been attacked the day before packed their belongings and temporarily left the city. In these days, attacks against highlanders and communal tensions between Somali and Oromo took place in various cities in and close to SRS, namely in Dire Dawa, Degehabur, Wardheer, Qabridehar, Gode and other places. Abdi 'Iley' stepped down and was arrested on 6 August.

Inter-ethnic relations in transition times

What can we learn from recent inter-ethnic conflict in Ethiopia's SRS? There are lessons both obvious and less obvious to be drawn. First, as [has been noted before](#), ethnically defined federalism has a serious problem of accommodating both ethnic others and [cosmopolitan communities](#). Ethiopia's federalism remains a territorial type of federalism tying particular people to particular territories. When practiced in an exclusivist 'sons of the soil' spirit, it creates and cements unequal rights among citizens. In pastoralist areas, ethnic federalism has accelerated territorial disputes and [sedentarisation](#). By design, ethnically defined administration invites conflict where different ethnic groups meet, which is typically at the border. Asnake Kefale pointed out in 2010 that '[any policy that seeks to match ethnic and intra-federal boundaries is likely to foment sub-state nationalism](#)'.

Second, in periods of uncertainty and rapid political change ethnic federalism's shortcomings are aggravated. When the political centre appears weak – which was the case during Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn's 2012 to 2018 *interregnum* – or reinvents itself, as has been the case since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took over in April 2018, regional and local elites reposition themselves to settle old scores and to advance their interests. While the centre and its federal institutions are in crisis or survival mode, local strongmen get a free pass to play the ethnic card. Observers tend to designate these conflicts as 'ethnic'. But they are ethnic more in form than in substance. In reality state institutions that [define property and political order](#) in Ethiopia – from the federal constitution to regional and local administrations – are the prime cause of these inter-ethnic conflicts. Local inter-ethnic violence in SRS and other parts of Ethiopia are connected to national political dynamics. Inter-ethnic strife is driven by interests that emanate from other places, namely regional and national elites. Both the Gerri-Jarso and the broader Somali-Oromo conflict illustrate this.

Third, inter-ethnic conflicts differ in nature. In the SRS, mixed Somali-Oromo and Oromo-Somali communities at least have the option of choosing between two competing ethnically defined regional states. That is not the case for ethnic outsiders who live in the midst of an ethnically defined territory such as the *habeshi* residing in Jigjiga, or the many other secondary cities of the country. They are at the mercy of the Somali majority and have no political, or very little legal recourse to safeguard their rights. No Somali constituency will take up their cause and they will not be compensated for loss of lives and property. This points to the need to establish [minority rights](#) both in the federal and regional constitution and legislation.



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