

ETHIOPIA

OPPOSITION GROUPS: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS



Ministry of Immigration
and Integration

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Immigration Service

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Disclaimer

This brief report is written according to the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) Country of Origin Information (COI) report methodology.¹

The brief report is not and does not purport to be a detailed or comprehensive survey of all aspects of the issues addressed and should be weighed against other available information on the general political situation and treatment of opposition groups in Ethiopia.

The brief report at hand does not include any policy recommendations or analysis. The information in the report does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS).

Furthermore, this report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

¹ EASO, *EASO Country of Origin Information Report Methodology*, June 2019, [url](#)

Abbreviations

ATP	Anti-Terrorism Proclamation
COI	Country of Origin
DIS	Danish Immigration Service
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
ECSJ	Ethiopia Citizens for Social Justice
EPRDF	Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front
FBC	Fana Broadcasting Cooperation
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ODF	Oromo Democratic Front
ONLA	Ogaden National Liberation Army
ONLF	Ogaden National Liberation Front
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
OLA	Oromo Liberation Army
OLF-SG	Oromo Liberation Front- Shane Group
SNA	Somalia National Army
WSLF	Western Somali Liberation Front
WBO	Waraana Bilisummaa Oromoo

Introduction and methodology

This brief report has been written with the aim of providing updated information on the political situation in Ethiopia with focus on the treatment of members or persons affiliated with the following opposition groups: Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Oromo Democratic Front (ODF) and Ginbot 7.

The brief report is the product of research into available open source information from a number of written sources, including reports from human rights organisations, academic publications, COI-reports and news articles. Furthermore, two sources with updated knowledge of the situation in Ethiopia were consulted; an academic researcher and a representative of an international human rights organisation.

The sources consulted were informed about the purpose of the report and that their statements would be included in a public report. The notes from the meetings with the sources were forwarded to them for approval, giving them a chance to amend, comment or correct their statements. Both sources approved their statements. The statements are found in their full extent in Appendix 1.

Attention should be called to the changeable situation in Ethiopia, including the impact which the coming national election may have on the political situation.

The research and editing of this report was finalised in January 2020.

The report is available on the website of DIS www.newtodenmark.dk and thus is available to all stakeholders in the refugee status determination process as well as to the general public.

1. Background information

Ethiopia is a landlocked east African country with a population of approximately 108 million. It is composed of more than 80 distinct ethnic groups.² Ethnicity is a central factor in the organisation of political life in Ethiopia and a number of the opposition groups including Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Oromo Democratic Front (ODF), are ethnically based political parties.³ However, political influence does not derive from size of the ethnic groups: the Tigrayans that account for about 6 % of the population have dominated political life for the past decades whereas the Oromos, the largest ethnic group with 34,4 % of the population, have been marginalised. Other ethnic groups are the Amharas with 27 % and the Somali with about with 6 % of the population.⁴

Ethiopia is a federal republic with a constitution that provides for an independent judiciary. However, the governance of the country has been characterised as ‘authoritarian’.⁵ Since 1991 Ethiopia has been ruled by a coalition of four ethnically based parties, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The last national elections took place in 2015: EPRDF, which is dominated by the Tigrayans, won all seats in the Parliament (House of People’s Representatives). The elections were by foreign observers characterised as ‘not fair’.⁶

The level of conflicts in Ethiopia has been high since 2015 where large-scale anti-government protests began in the Oromo Regional State and then gradually spread across the country. The government responded with a series of state of emergencies up until June 2018 to restore peace and order, but the unrest continued.⁷ The intensity of the conflicts led to a change of leadership within the ruling coalition: in March 2018, Dr Abiy Ahmed Ali, previously vice president in the Oromo Regional State, became the chairman of EPRDF, and in April 2018 he was nominated prime minister by the parliament.

As Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed initiated a reform programme aiming at fostering economic growth, political change and judicial reforms and also took action to live up to these promise of reforms: during 2018 political prisoners, who had been put to jail under the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (ATP), were released, opposition groups were removed from the national list of terrorist organisations and their leaders were invited to return to Ethiopia.⁸ Furthermore, Abiy Ahmed succeeded in ending 20 years of the ‘no peace, no war’ situation with Eritrea, marked by the signing of a peace agreement in Asmara on 9 July 2018 together with Eritrea’s President.⁹

In 2019, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.¹⁰ However, it was a year of conflicts. There was widespread ethnic violence across the country, including in Addis Ababa and in the regional states of Amhara and Oromia.¹¹ The number of internally displaced persons also remained high

² Norway, Landinfo, *Ethiopia: Basisinfo*, 2019, [url](#); CIA, *The World Factbook, Africa: Ethiopia*, 2020, [url](#)

³ EIP, *Preventing violent extremism in the Horn: The case of ethnic extremism in Ethiopia*, July 2019, [url](#)

⁴ CIA, *The World Factbook, Africa: Ethiopia*, 2020, [url](#)

⁵ Austria, ACCORD, *Ethiopia: COI Compilation*, November 2019, [url](#), p. 8

⁶ BTI, *Country Report, Ethiopia 2018*, n.d., [url](#)

⁷ BTI, *Country Report, Ethiopia 2018*, n.d., [url](#)

⁸ Denmark, DIS, *Report on political situation and treatment of political opposition*, September 2018, [url](#), p. 4

⁹ EASO, *Eritrea: National service and illegal exit*, September 2019, [url](#), p. 16

¹⁰ Austria, ACCORD, *Ethiopia: COI Compilation*, November 2019, [url](#), pp. 26-27

¹¹ HRW, *World Report 2020 - Ethiopia*, 14 January 2020, [url](#)

during 2019: more than two million Ethiopians are displaced, 620,000 due to fights in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region and in Oromia.¹²

This violence, which the authorities did not fully control, constitutes a challenge to Abiy Ahmed's leadership.¹³ His authority to act as a leader is to a large extent depending on his chances of winning the national elections which are planned to take place in August 2020.¹⁴ However, the parliament has voted to postpone a national census, which should have formed the basis for new electoral list.¹⁵

2. Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF)

Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) is a separatist group of ethnic Somali nationalists based and operating in eastern Ethiopia, in the Somali regional state.¹⁶ ONLF was formed after the defeat of Somalia in 1978.¹⁷ In the early nineties, the group joined the political process in Ethiopia and performed well in regional parliamentary elections.¹⁸ After winning the regional parliamentary elections, ONLF called for a referendum on self-determination in 1994. However, the referendum was rejected by the central government in Addis Ababa, and ONLF was forced out of office by the federal security forces.¹⁹ The group launched an armed insurgency and since the mid-1990s the armed wing of the ONLF, the Ogaden National Liberation Army (ONLA), has been engaged in conflicts against the Ethiopian army (the Ethiopian Defence Force) in the region.²⁰

In 2007, the armed conflict between ONLF and the Ethiopian army escalated, when ONLF attacked an oilfield located in Abole in the Somali regional state, killing 74 workers.²¹ The following years were marked by numerous human rights violations including, forced displacement, disappearances and torture. These violations were reported to have been committed by the Ethiopian troops stationed in the Somali regional state.²²

¹² OCHA, *Ethiopia: Gedeo and West Guji Displacement Snapshot (as of March 2019)*, n.d. [url](#), HRW, *World Report 2020 - Ethiopia*, 14 January 2020, [url](#)

¹³ United State Peace Institute, *A Year of Change in Ethiopia*, 2 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴ Africanews, *Ethiopia elections body sets Aug. 16 as tentative date for 2020 polls*, 15 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵ HRW, *World Report 2020 - Ethiopia*, 14 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶ UK, Home Office, *Country Information Note, Ethiopia, Opposition to government*, October 2017, [url](#), p. 25

¹⁷ In 1975, the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) was founded with the aim of uniting the Ogaden region (Somali region) with the Somali Republic. Backed by the Somalia National Army (SNA), the WSLF launched a military offensive against the Ethiopian state in 1977. In March 1978, Ethiopia and its international allies defeated the WSLF and drove the Somali army out of the region, re-establishing Ethiopian rule on the Ethiopian/Somali border. Hagmann, Tobias, *Talking Peace in the Ogaden, The search for an end to conflict in the Somali Regional State in Ethiopia*, 2014, [url](#), p.19

¹⁸ CFR, *Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF)*, 1 November 2017, [url](#)

¹⁹ Hagmann, Tobias, *Talking Peace in the Ogaden, The search for an end to conflict in the Somali Regional State in Ethiopia*, 2014, [url](#), p.19

²⁰ Australia, DFAT, *Country Information Report, Ethiopia*, 28 September 2017, [url](#), p. 13; Denmark, DIS, *Ethiopia, political situation and treatment of opposition*, September 2018, [url](#), p. 14

²¹ The Guardian, *Ethnic Somali rebel kill 74 at Chinese oilfield in Ethiopia*, 25 April 2007, [url](#)

²² Hagmann, Tobias, *Talking Peace in the Ogaden, The search for an end to conflict in the Somali Regional State in Ethiopia*, 2014, [url](#), p.21

In 2011, ONLF was designated as a terrorist organisation by the government under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (ATP).²³ Thus, any alleged ONLF activities or support would lead to arrest and persecution by the authorities.²⁴

A report by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) published in July 2018 noted that the frequency of attacks by ONLF had decreased greatly in recent years.²⁵ Similarly, a report published by Danish Immigration Service (DIS) in September 2018 stated that ONLF has politically and militarily been diminished.²⁶

2.1 Development since 2018

2.1.1 Political development

In July 2018, the Government of Ethiopia removed ONLF from its list of terrorist organisations.²⁷ Three months later, in October 2018, the government and ONLF signed a peace agreement in Asmara, bringing an end to a 34-year long insurgency in the Somali regional state.²⁸

In August 2018, the Somali regional state's president Abdi Mohammed Omar, also known as Abdi Illey was arrested and replaced by Mustafa Omer, an exiled activist and former UN worker.²⁹ Mustafa Omer was later endorsed by ONLF's leadership.³⁰

The Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed invited opposition leaders to return to the country and resume political activities. The major opposition parties, including ONLF, welcomed the request.³¹ In November 2018, the Ethiopian Airline flew large numbers of uniformed ONLF members from Eritrea to Jigjiga, the capital of the Somali regional state.³² In December 2018, the leadership of ONLF had returned to Ethiopia.³³

According to ONLF's twitter account, the group opened an office in Addis Ababa in July 2019.³⁴ This observation was confirmed by the interviewed sources in December 2019 and January 2020.³⁵ One source elaborated that members of ONLF have regular and open meetings throughout the region. Also, their leadership appears in public and meets regularly with government officials in the region.³⁶

In April 2019, the regional government and ONLF signed an agreement to disarm and reintegrate members of the ONLF into the state's security forces and civil service.³⁷ The interviewed academic researcher who has been based in the region during 2019 has personally witnessed the disarmament of some ONLF

²³ UK, Home Office, *Country Information Note, Ethiopia, Opposition to government*, August 2019, [url](#), p. 9; Ethiopia, National Legislative Bodies/National Authorities, *Ethiopia: Proclamation No. 652/2009 of 2009, Anti-Terrorism Proclamation*, 7 July 2009, [url](#)

²⁴ Norway, Landinfo, *Respons: Etiopia: Spesialpolitiet (Liyu Police) i Somaliaregionen*, 3 July 2016, [url](#), p. 6

²⁵ HRW, *We are like Dead*, July 2018, [url](#), p.21

²⁶ Denmark, DIS, *Ethiopia, political situation and treatment of opposition*, September 2018, [url](#), p. 14

²⁷ Norway, Landinfo, *Respons, Etiopia: Politisk utvikling i 2018*, 30 January 2019, [url](#), p. 3

²⁸ Reliefweb, *Gov't, ONLF Sign Peace Deal*, 22 October 2018, [url](#)

²⁹ HRW, *Interview: Inside What Was Ethiopia's Jail Ogaden*, nd, [url](#)

³⁰ Norway, Landinfo, *Respons Etiopia: ONLF og reaksjoner fra myndigheter*, 7 December 2018, [url](#), p. 2

³¹ US DoS, *Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 – Ethiopia*, 13 March 2019, [url](#)

³² Norway, Landinfo, *Respons Etiopia: ONLF og reaksjoner fra myndigheter*, 7 December 2018, [url](#), p. 2

³³ Garowe Online, *ONLF leader returns to Ethiopia after peace deal*, 1 December 2018, [url](#)

³⁴ ONLF Twitter, *Opening ceremony of the ONLF office in Addis Ababa*, 13 July 2019, [url](#)

³⁵ Academic researcher, December 2019: 1, International human rights organisation, January 2020: 18

³⁶ International human rights organisation: 12

³⁷ Aljazeera News, *Ethiopia signs peace deal with former Ogaden rebels*, 13 April 2019, [url](#)

fighters, and also observed some of the reintegration initiatives. As an example the source mentioned that former combatants were given financial aid as means to reintegrate them into civil society. Asked about the number of disarmed ONLF fighters, the researcher noted that there are no official figures to confirm the amount of fighters who had been disarmed.³⁸ According to Al Jazeera, 2,000 fighters have been disarmed whereas the Ethiopian news outlet, Fana Broadcasting Cooperation (FBC), reported that 1,740 fighters have been disarmed.³⁹

According to an article published in the Economist in October 2019, the ONLF leadership has announced to participate in the 2020 national elections in Ethiopia.⁴⁰ This information was confirmed by both of the interviewed sources.⁴¹ ONLF had during a recent congress discussed strategies for the upcoming national election, and made the necessary registration with the National Electoral Board.⁴² The same source stated that the electoral lists for the Somali regional state are considered to be ready.⁴³

2.1.2 Liyu Police

The Ethiopian authorities created The Liyu (“special” in Amharic) police in 2007 due to the escalation of the armed conflict between ONLF and the government. By 2008, the Liyu police had become a prominent counter-insurgency unit in the Somali regional state.⁴⁴ In 2017, HRW reported on extrajudicial killings, torture, rape, and violence as well as attacks against local communities committed by the Liyu police.⁴⁵

In August 2018, the former Chief of Liyu Police Abdirahman Abdullahi Burale, also known as Abdirahman Lagagole, fled the country in connection with the arrest of former president of the Somali regional state.⁴⁶

The Liyu police have undergone reforms and its leadership has been replaced. Moreover, the Liyu police are no longer engaged in warfare in the Somali regional state. The activities of the Liyu police are well monitored by its new leadership, and significant progress has been made.⁴⁷ Members of the Liyu police are undergoing a large retraining programme to ensure their operations comply with human rights standards. Also, new soldiers have been recruited to join the Liyu police force, including former ONLF fighters. Some former members of ONLF’s intelligence have returned and taken on senior positions in the Liyu police. However, a few key senior Liyu police and intelligence officials, including some of those implicated in abuse in the past, remain and are given promotions.⁴⁸

³⁸ Academic researcher, December 2019: 3

³⁹ Austria, ACCORD, *Ethiopia: COI Compilation*, November 2019, [url](#), p. 39

⁴⁰ The Economist, *Ethiopia’s most repressive state is reforming*, 3 October 2019, [url](#)

⁴¹ Academic researcher, December 2019: 9, International human rights organisation, January 2020: 18

⁴² International Organisation, January 2020: 18

⁴³ Academic researcher, December 2019: 9

⁴⁴ Norway, Landinfo, *Respons: Etiopia: Spesialpolitiet (Liyu Police) i Somaliaregionen*, 3 July 2016, [url](#), p. 6

⁴⁵ HRW, *Ethiopia: No Justice in Somali Region Killings*, 5 April 2017, [url](#)

⁴⁶ Sweden, Migrationsverket, *Etiopien: Situationen i Somaliregionen efter det senaste årets förändringar i landet*, 17 September 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁴⁷ Academic researcher, December 2019: 11, Sweden, Migrationsverket, *Etiopien: Situationen i Somaliregionen efter det senaste årets förändringar i landet*, 17 September 2019, [url](#), p. 1, International human rights organisation, January 2020: 20

⁴⁸ International human rights organisation, January 2020: 20

In May 2019, the Somali regional state announced the establishment of a Human Rights Commission.⁴⁹ This information was also captured in the Economist’s article from October 2019. The article further stated that ONLF will be part of the commission, which aims to investigate committed human rights violations and monitor the current situation in the region.⁵⁰ In addition, the academic researcher interviewed in December 2019 mentioned that a joint committee, consisting of representatives of the Somali regional state and ONLF, has been established to oversee reconciliation efforts and initiatives dealing with the past.⁵¹

2.1.3 Jail Ogaden

Jail Ogaden was a regional detention facility administered in part by the Liyu police in Somali regional state where people suspected of supporting the ONLF were detained.⁵² HRW which has consistently documented human rights violations in the region described the conditions in Jail Ogaden as being inhuman, especially for persons suspected of terrorism under the ATP. In July 2018, many prisoners were released, and in August 2018 the prison was closed.⁵³ A year later, HRW reported that some of those responsible for the abuses in Jail Ogaden are in prison and facing justice while others have fled the region.⁵⁴

2.1.4 Treatment of members or persons affiliated with the ONLF

The UK Home Office states in its report from August 2019 that members or persons affiliated with ONLF “...have historically been exposed to surveillance, harassment, arrest, torture and ill-treatment, including during the most recent State of Emergency (February-June 2018). This treatment also sometimes extended to supporters and family members or those perceived to be affiliated with [...] ONLF...”⁵⁵

According to Landinfo, members or persons affiliated with ONLF are no longer considered to be at risk of persecution by the authorities – neither in Addis Ababa nor in the Somali region state.⁵⁶ The sources interviewed advised to have no knowledge about ill-treatment of members or persons affiliated with ONLF.⁵⁷ Generally speaking, it is possible to display political flags publicly, express political association and use social media without reservations.⁵⁸ One source stated that senior ONLF members have been able to move freely in Addis Ababa.⁵⁹

Persons who were imprisoned for being related to ONLF have been released.⁶⁰ However, one source mentioned the possibility of few detainees remaining in prison. Nevertheless, the same source stressed that all high-profile prisoners have been released from detention facilities in the Somali region state and those under the administration of federal government.⁶¹

⁴⁹ Sweden, Migrationsverket, *Etiopien: Situationen i Soamliregionen efter det senaste årets förändringar i landet*, 17 September 2019, [url](#), p. 2; The Economist, *Ethiopia’s most repressive state is reforming*, 3 October 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁰ The Economist, *Ethiopia’s most repressive state is reforming*, 3 October 2019, [url](#)

⁵¹ Academic researcher, December 2019: 2

⁵² HRW, *Interview: Years of Untold Suffering at Jail Ogaden*, May 2016, [url](#)

⁵³ HRW, *Ethiopia, Event of 2018*, nd. [url](#)

⁵⁴ HRW, *Interview: Inside What Was Ethiopia’s Jail Ogaden*, 19 July 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁵ UK, Home Office, *Country Information Note, Ethiopia, Opposition to government*, August 2019, [url](#), p. 9

⁵⁶ Norway, Landinfo, *Respons Etiopia: ONLF og reaksjoner fra myndigheter*, 7 December 2018, [url](#), pp. 1-2

⁵⁷ Academic researcher, December 2019: 6, International human rights organisation, January 2020: 15, 16

⁵⁸ Academic researcher, December 2019: 6

⁵⁹ International human rights organisation, January 2020: 15

⁶⁰ Norway, Landinfo, *Respons Etiopia: ONLF og reaksjoner fra myndigheter*, 7 December 2018, [url](#), p. 1, International human rights organisation, January 2020: 19; Academic researcher, December 2019

⁶¹ International human rights organisation, January 2020: 19

A source consulted by the Swedish Migration Agency in May 2019 described the general security situation in the Somali region state to be 'okay'.⁶² A recent returnee interviewed by the Economist in October 2019 narrated the current situation in the Somali region state as being the safest place in Ethiopia.⁶³

Members and persons affiliated with ONLF who left the region for neighbouring countries have returned.⁶⁴ Moreover, returnees have been welcomed back and treated positively by their communities, government and security forces.⁶⁵ However, the situation in the rural areas seems to be different. The academic researcher explained that there have been examples where local administration have discriminated against former ONLF members in various ways, including access to basic services. Furthermore, the source argued that this is not a widespread phenomenon, and some of these incidents had also been motivated by personal revenge issues.⁶⁶

Members of ONLF have taken up positions in government service in the Somali region state.⁶⁷ This statement was confirmed by the interviewed sources. Furthermore, ONLF members have been able to find other jobs. However, this did not apply to persons who have been engaged in the armed conflict.⁶⁸

The international human rights organisation representative underlined that the status of ONLF supporters, members and leadership may change rapidly, depending on the outcome of the coming national elections in Ethiopia.⁶⁹

3. Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Oromo Democratic Front (ODF)

Oromia is Ethiopia's most populous regional state located in the southeast part of Ethiopia.⁷⁰ The last census, which was conducted in 2007, counted more than 25 million Oromos in Ethiopia out of which more than 23 million lived in the Oromo regional state.⁷¹ The Oromos are a specific ethnic group characterised by a shared language (called *afan oromo*), residency in Oromia (primarily) and familiarity with Oromo cultural traditions and social forms of organisation (the *gadda* system).⁷² A majority of Oromos, 55-60 %, are Muslim and 45 % are Christian (primarily Orthodox Christians); 15 % practice traditional religion.⁷³

⁶² Sweden, Migrationsverket, *Etiopien: Situationen i Somaliregionen efter det senaste årets förändringar i landet*, 17 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-5

⁶³ The Economist, *Ethiopia's most repressive state is reforming*, 3 October 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁴ Academic researcher, December 2019: 5, 8

⁶⁵ International human rights organisation, January 2020: 16

⁶⁶ Academic researcher, December 2019: 8

⁶⁷ The Economist, *Ethiopia's most repressive state is reforming*, 3 October 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁸ Academic researcher, December 2019: 5, International human rights organisation, January 2020: 14

⁶⁹ International human rights organisation, January 2020: 14

⁷⁰ Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat, Etiopia: Oromo i Etiopia: Politiske grupper og menneskerettigheter 2005-2010*, 5 March 2010, [url](#), p. 5

⁷¹ Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat, Etiopia: Oromo i Etiopia: Politiske grupper og menneskerettigheter 2005-2010*, 5 March 2010, [url](#), p. 5, Central Statistical Authority, *2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia: Statistical Report for Oromiya Region; Part I: Population Size and Characteristics*

⁷² Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat, Etiopia: Oromo i Etiopia: Politiske grupper og menneskerettigheter 2005-2010*, 5 March 2010, [url](#), p. 5, UK Home Office, *Country Policy and Information Note, Ethiopia: Oromos*, version 3.0, 2019, [url](#)

⁷³ USCIS, *Ethiopia and the Oromo People: Is it possible to determine whether an Ethiopian is an ethnic Oromo by the individual's last name? What religion or religions are practiced by ethnic Oromos in Ethiopia*, 28 April 1998, [url](#)

Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) is an ethnically based, nationalist party that seeks to promote the right to national self-determination for the Oromo people.⁷⁴ OLF was founded as a political organisation in 1973; it became registered as an independent party in 1991.⁷⁵ The party has been in opposition to Ethiopia's ruling party EPRDF since 1992.⁷⁶ According to sources, the OLF has 'a few thousands soldiers' in different groups.⁷⁷ One is the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) which runs military training camps inside Ethiopia; another is the armed group, the Oromo Liberation Front – Shane Group (OLF-SG), and a third is the army by the name *Waraana Bilisummaa Oromoo* (WBO).⁷⁸ In June 1992, OLF began to conduct a 'low-intensity' war with armed attacks against the EPRDF.⁷⁹ In response hereto, the Ethiopian government put the OLF on the national list of terrorist organisations.⁸⁰ The EPRDF established a regime-friendly Oromo organisation, the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and channelled political collaboration, but not influence, through this organisation.⁸¹ Over the years, OLF has been increasingly inactive and has lost political and military influence.⁸²

The current leader of OLF is Dawud Ibsa (also known as Abbo Dawud Ebsa). He has the title of chairman and he is reported to live in exile in Asmara, the capital of neighbouring Eritrea.⁸³

Oromo Democratic Front (ODF) was established in 2013 as an off-spring of OLF. It distinguishes itself from the mother party in the way that this political group renounces the use of violence and seeks to obtain its political goals of self-determination for the Oromos through democratic means.⁸⁴ It is led by Leenco Lata, one of the co-founders of OLF; the deputy chairperson is Dima Nagawo.

Exiled leaders of ODF were included in Prime Minister Abiy's invitation to return; they accepted this invitation and have returned to Ethiopia.⁸⁵

3.1 Development since 2018

Following Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's declared intention of normalising the situation for opposition parties, a number of events shaped the current situation of OLF in the Ethiopian political landscape. In 2018, the Ethiopian Parliament decided to remove OLF from the national list of terrorist organisations.⁸⁶ Secondly, the OLF leadership announced a unilateral ceasefire. The next step was the signing of a 'reconciliation agreement to end hostilities' by representatives of the Ethiopian government and by OLF's leader, Dawud Ibsa. Then, OLF decided to merge with the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC). OFC is another

⁷⁴ Al, *Ethiopia: 'Because I am Oromo': Sweeping repression in the Oromia region of Ethiopia*, 28 October 2014, [url](#)

⁷⁵ Austria, ACCORD, *Ethiopia: COI Compilation*, November 2019, [url](#), p. 36

⁷⁶ Austria, ACCORD, *Ethiopia: COI Compilation*, November 2019, [url](#), p. 37

⁷⁷ Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat: Oromo i Etiopia: politiske grupper og menneskerettigheter 2005-2010*, [url](#), p. 15

⁷⁸ UK, Home Office, *Country Policy and Information Note, Ethiopia: Oromos*, version 3.0, 2019, [url](#), ACCORD, *Ethiopia: COI Compilation*, November 2019, [url](#), p.37

⁷⁹ Landinfo, *Temanotat, Etiopia: Reaksjoner ved retur og politisk aktivitet i eksil (sur place)*, [url](#), ACCORD, *Ethiopia: COI Compilation*, November 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁰ Austria, ACCORD, *Ethiopia: COI Compilation*, November 2019, [url](#)

⁸¹ Landinfo, *Temanotat, Etiopia: Reaksjoner ved retur og politisk aktivitet i eksil (sur place)*, [url](#)

⁸² DIS, *Report on political situation and treatment of political opposition*, September 2018, [url](#), p. 4, UK, Home Office, *Country Policy and Information Note, Ethiopia: Oromos*, version 3.0, 2019, [url](#)

⁸³ Austria, ACCORD, *Ethiopia: COI Compilation*, November 2019, [url](#), Mailonline, *Ethiopia's largest ethnic group marks thanksgiving*, 5 October 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁴ Austria, ACCORD, *Ethiopia: COI Compilation*, November 2019, [url](#), p.36

⁸⁵ US DoS, *Human Rights Practices 2018 – Ethiopia*, 18 March 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁶ US DoS, *Country Report on Terrorism 2018 - Chapter 1 - Ethiopia*, 1 November 2019, [url](#)

Oromo political organisation, which is in opposition to the Ethiopian ruling coalition.⁸⁷ It is led by Chairperson Merera Gudina; the chairperson and the deputy have been imprisoned by the Ethiopian authorities.⁸⁸

As a part of his reform programme, Abiy Ahmed, who is an Oromo and the first Oromo-speaking leader of Ethiopia, openly invited all diaspora based opposition groups to return to Ethiopia in 2018: the leaders of OLF accepted his invitation and returned to the country on 15 September 2018.⁸⁹ The return of the leadership was widely reported by media and publically celebrated in both Addis Ababa and in the regional capital of Oromia; the celebrations included public display of the Oromo flag.⁹⁰ The Chairperson of OLF has said that the militants will be disarmed but some leaders of the army have not accepted this; a statement has been released by the army wing of that party (WBO) stating that WBO will separate from the OLF.

In October 2019, the Oromos were for the first time allowed to celebrate their thanksgiving festival (the *Irreecha* festival) in Addis Ababa, a city which many Oromos claim belong to their group.⁹¹ By contrast, in 2016 hundreds of lives were lost during this celebration because of the security forces' use of firearms against the crowd of celebrators in the town of Bishoftu.⁹²

3.1.1 Treatment of members or persons affiliated with the OLF or ODF

The Ethiopian authorities have dropped charges against or released 'more than 10,000 individuals charged and convicted with crimes of terrorism and corruption' and that has also affected Oromo-rebels: in the beginning of 2018, the authorities released the imprisoned OLF chairperson (January 17) and the deputy chairperson (February 13).⁹³ Opposition parties have now been allowed by the authorities to rent office spaces in Oromia.⁹⁴

Several hundreds of previous OLF fighters from OLF-SG) have been disarmed and allowed to integrate into the national security forces. The process of disarmament was not complete according to media sources inside Ethiopia.⁹⁵

There are indications that young people who are not connected to the ruling coalition sometimes have difficulties in obtaining letters of support (which are issued by the neighbourhoods); these letters are required to be able to find a job. US DoS mentions that members of the opposition also have encountered difficulties in obtaining these support letters.⁹⁶ It is furthermore stated that members of the Ethiopian opposition continue to receive 'intimidating and unwelcomed visits' to their offices and their homes (consisting of entry and searches of without a warrant) by persons working for the ruling party or by militia members.⁹⁷

⁸⁷ UK, Home Office, *Country Policy and Information Note, Ethiopia: Oromos*, version 3.0, 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁸ US DoS, *Human Rights Practices 2018 – Ethiopia*, 18 March 2019, [url](#) p. 12

⁸⁹ Austria, ACCORD, *Ethiopia: COI Compilation, November 2019*, [url](#) p. 36

⁹⁰ Austria, ACCORD, *Ethiopia: COI Compilation, November 2019*, [url](#) p. 36

⁹¹ Mailonline, *Ethiopia's largest ethnic group marks thanksgiving*, 5 October 2019, [url](#)

⁹² HRW, *"Fuel on the Fire" Security Force Response to the 2016 Irreecha Cultural Festival*, 19 September 2017, [url](#)

⁹³ US DoS, *Human Rights Practices 2018 – Ethiopia*, 18 March 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁴ US DoS, *Human Rights Practices 2018 – Ethiopia*, 18 March 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁵ Austria, ACCORD, *Ethiopia: COI Compilation*, November 2019, [url](#) p. 36

⁹⁶ US DoS, *Human Rights Practices 2018 – Ethiopia*, 18 March 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁷ US DoS, *Human Rights Practices 2018 – Ethiopia*, 18, March 2019, [url](#)

4. Ginbot 7

Ginbot 7 is also known as G7, Arbegnoch (Patriot) Ginbot 7 for Unity and Democratic Movement (AGUDM), Patriotic Ginbot 7 and PG7. It is an Ethiopian political opposition group, which was founded on 15 May 2008 (in Amharic the name means 15 May) fighting for political change in Ethiopia.⁹⁸

The goal of Ginbot 7 is to achieve a democratic change in Ethiopia and to fight for an end of the EPRDF regime by the use of peaceful as well as military means.⁹⁹ The military means include armed attacks on government facilities (an ammunition depot) in the capital Addis Ababa as well as in the regional state of Amhara (in the Gonder zone), and Ginbot 7 has been described as ‘the most active rebel group’ among the opposition groups in Ethiopia.¹⁰⁰ The size of the armed groups under Ginbot 7 is unknown.

Ginbot 7 is not seeking to promote the cause of any specific ethnic group and the group has mobilised Ethiopians inside and outside of the country. Inside Ethiopia, Ginbot 7 was organised in small, autonomous cells of four to five persons; these cells were found across the country.¹⁰¹

The Ginbot 7 group is led by Berhanu Nega, chairman, and Andargachew Tsige, secretary-general. Tsige had been detained since 2014 by the Ethiopian authorities (serving both two life-sentences and a death penalty) but was released on 29 May 2018.¹⁰²

4.1 Development since 2018

In recent years, the Ginbot 7 group has been based in Eritrea but continued to operate inside Ethiopia.¹⁰³ In June 2018, the leadership announced a unilateral ceasefire in all regions of Ethiopia and declared that Ginbot 7 would end armed attacks against the Ethiopian authorities and would from now on support Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s reform agenda.¹⁰⁴ Then in July same year, Ginbot 7 together with ONLF and OLF, was removed from the national list of terrorist organisations by the Ethiopian Parliament. The group’s leadership, both the chairman and the secretary-general, who had lived in exile in Eritrea, returned to Addis Ababa in September 2018 upon the open invitation by Abiy Ahmed to the diaspora.¹⁰⁵

During the last six months of 2019, there were increasingly reports about internal strife within Ginbot 7 due to financial and leadership problems.¹⁰⁶ These problems resulted in the dissolution of Ginbot 7: in May 2019, Ginbot 7, together with six other dissolved parties, merged into a new party by the name Ethiopia Citizens for Social Justice (ECSJ). The goal of the new party is a stable, democratic Ethiopia. ECSJ is led by

⁹⁸ Norway, Landinfo, *Ethiopia: The Ginbot 7 party. Topical Note*. August 2012, [url](#), p. 6,

UK, Home Office, *Country Policy and Information Note Ethiopia: Opposition to the government*, August 2019, [url](#) p. 35

⁹⁹ Austria, ACCORD, *Ethiopia: COI Compilation*, November 2019, [url](#) p. 40

¹⁰⁰ UK, Home Office, *Country Policy and Information Note Ethiopia: Opposition to the government*, August 2019, [url](#), p. 35 Landinfo, *Ethiopia: The Ginbot 7 party. Topical Note*. August 2012, [url](#)

¹⁰¹ Landinfo, *Ethiopia: The Ginbot 7 party. Topical Note*. August 2012, [url](#) p. 7

¹⁰² UK, Home Office, *Country Policy and Information Note Ethiopia: Opposition to the government*, August 2019, [url](#) p. 36

¹⁰³ Austria, ACCORD, *Ethiopia: COI Compilation*, November 2019, [url](#) p. 41

¹⁰⁴ UK, Home Office, *Country Policy and Information Note Ethiopia: Opposition to the government*, August 2019, [url](#), p. 36, ACCORD, *Ethiopia: COI Compilation*, November 2019, [url](#) p. 41

¹⁰⁵ Afrinews, *Ethiopia govt welcomes leadership of Ginbot 7 back home*, 9 September 2018, [url](#), Freedom House: *Freedom in the World 2019 - Ethiopia*, 4 February 2019, [url](#) p. 41

¹⁰⁶ Austria, ACCORD, *Ethiopia: COI Compilation*, November 2019, [url](#) p. 41

the former chairman of Ginbot 7, Berhanu Nega.¹⁰⁷ Thereby Ginbot 7, according to the UK Home Office, stopped having an independent existence.

4.1.1 *Treatment of members or persons affiliated with the Ginbot 7*

Charges against the former leaders of Ginbot 7 have been dropped by the Ethiopian authorities and the conditions for opposition groups have been improved by the reforms initiated by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.¹⁰⁸

It has not been possible to find information which specifically describes how persons who are affiliated with Ginbot 7 have been treated by the Ethiopian authorities after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed invited all diaspora to return to Ethiopia. According to information in the United States Department of State's report on human rights practices in Ethiopia, young people who are not connected to the ruling coalition sometimes have difficulties in obtaining letters of support (which are issued by the neighbourhoods); these letters are required to be able to find a job. The same source mentions that members of the opposition also have encountered difficulties in obtaining these support letters.¹⁰⁹ It is furthermore stated that members of the Ethiopian opposition continue to receive 'intimidating and unwelcomed visits' to their offices and their homes (consisting of entry and searches of without a warrant) by persons working for the ruling party or by militia members.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ UK ,Home Office, *Country Policy and Information Note Ethiopia: Opposition to the government*, August 2019, [url](#) p. 37

¹⁰⁸ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2019 - Ethiopia*, 4 February 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁹ US DoS, *Human Rights Practices 2018 – Ethiopia*, 18 March 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁰ US DoS, *Human Rights Practices 2018 – Ethiopia*, 18 March 2019, [url](#)

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Appendix 1: Interview notes

Telephone interview with an academic researcher

31 December 2019

The source is a British-Somali academic researcher who has conducted fieldwork in Jijiga, the capital of the Somali regional state.

1. The source advised that the ONLF had signed an agreement with the Ethiopian government in Eritrea in October 2018 and that the agreement stipulated that the two parties should collaborate and that the ONLF should demobilise their armed rebels in order to reintegrate into the political process with peaceful means. The signing of this peace agreement was followed by the return of ONLF leaders to Ethiopia, this was marked by a ceremony which was widely covered by the media, and it captured a lot of attention in the region.
2. To promote a working-relationship between the ONLF and the Somali Regional State, and to oversee the implementation of certain components of the peace agreement, a joint committee consisting of representatives of the Somali Regional State and representatives of the ONLF has been established. Among other things, this committee will work on reconciliation issues and initiatives on dealing with the past.
3. The source had personally witnessed some of the ONLF soldiers being disarmed and saw that some were reintegrated into civilian life as she was based in the region in the first months of 2019. There are, however, no official figures to confirm the proportion of former soldiers who have been disarmed. Those who had given up their arms were given a package including money to enable them to restart their life.
4. According to the researcher, the disarmament was an expected development, since ONLF was already in the process of transitioning into a political party working in the Somali Region. Therefore, it was no longer a viable situation to have a standing army on its own and the former soldiers had to become civilian (or join the Liyu Police). However, the challenge of how to rehabilitate those soldiers, who joined as rebels at a very young age, remains. There is no adequate plan for the reintegration of former very young men who are without formal education after having spent years as combatants.
5. Many ONLF-affiliated persons who have left the region to live in Kenya and Somalia have now returned to the Somali Regional State and some of them have even found jobs in government services. Some former members of ONLF have been able to find jobs, including in government offices. Former armed rebels have not to the same extent found jobs.
6. Asked about the treatment of persons who are suspected of membership or association with the ONLF and who are in Addis Ababa, the researcher noted that there is no issue at all for those persons. To illustrate the situation, the source mentioned that people can publicly display their flags without encountering problems and express their political affiliation without fear using social media.

7. An ONLF office has been established in Addis Ababa which liaises with the government of Ethiopia and the international community, this office is functional and has not been exposed to problems. It is currently headed by a Danish citizen who decided to return, 25 years after he had fled the region.
8. 100,000s of those who had left for the neighbouring countries (in particular Kenya, Somalia and Sudan) have returned to a normalised life. There are no taboos, including former association with ONLF. However, for people who are far from the urban centers, it has been harder to spread the message of the peace deal. These areas, which can be as far as eight hours away from the regional capital, have seen examples of the local administration having discriminated against former ONLF members in various ways, including in terms of access to basic services. However, it was not a widespread phenomenon. Some incidents had also been motivated by personal revenge issues.
9. The source confirmed that the ONLF leadership has announced its intentions to participate in the coming national elections in Ethiopia and that the leadership has filed papers for their registration with the National Electoral Board. The stability of the region does not necessarily depend on the results of the scheduled national elections in May 2020, the researcher also found that the electoral lists which should enable an election to take place are ready in the Somali Regional State.
10. Asked about the closure of the Jail Ogaden, the source confirmed that this facility has been closed and further confirmed that there are now only ordinary prisoners in the region – not political prisoners.
11. Regarding the Liyu police, the researcher explained that this police force has been reformed after the coming into power of the new president. The Liyu police no longer engage in warfare in the Somali Regional State as there are no opposing forces to combat. The researcher underlined that the Liyu police is very well monitored by the security bureau and by the new commander in charge.

Email interview with a representative of an international human rights organisation

10 January 2020

The source is a representative of an international human rights organisation with several years of experience in working in the Horn of Africa.

In April 2019, Ethiopia's Somali Regional State and ONLF signed an agreement to disarm and reintegrate members of the ONLF into the state's security forces and civil service. Has the agreement been implemented?

12. It is not entirely clear the contents of the agreement so hard to know if it has been fully implemented but generally speaking there is peace, fighters have returned and mostly disarmed, and are in the process of being reintegrated into society. The ONLF has regular and open meetings throughout the Somali region. Their leadership regularly appears in public, and the SRS leadership regularly meets with them.

13. Under the previous government, Somali state security forces were very much decimated as the Liyu police took on most security functions. As a result, the rebuilding of non-Liyu police Somali region security forces [regional police, etc.] has been slow since the new government came in but I understand the regional state government is very committed to it. I haven't heard an update for at least 6 months though. So I'm not clear whether ONLF fighters have yet been reintegrated into the new security forces, LP aside. As part of the Liyu police reform, it is my understanding that some former ONLF fighters were given training and are now members of the Liyu police.

Are there examples of former ONLF members in government service?

14. There are many examples of ONLF supporters taking up government posts, including many who had been exiled for many years because of their alleged ONLF support. Having said all of this, the status of ONLF supporters/members/leadership could change quickly depending on what happens in the elections.

How do the Ethiopian authorities treat persons suspected of current membership or association with the ONLF?

15. I have not heard any concerns of ill-treatment. Ethnic Somalis often face challenges of discrimination in Addis and elsewhere but I have not heard any cases of ONLF members having any problems whatsoever in Addis. Senior leadership move around Addis with no problems.

16. I have not heard any substantive concerns whatsoever. I have heard about a few cases where a fighter returns after many years to their remote area and then they have had problems with local security, but that appears to be more about family/local dynamics than anything else. Generally speaking from what I have seen, ONLF fighters have been welcomed back and treated very positively by their communities, government and security forces. Having said that, there is little in the way of psychosocial services in the Somali region in general to help them cope with some of the abuses they may have faced in the past, and few options for alternate livelihoods in many locations.

Has the ONLF leadership announced any plans to participate in the coming national elections in Ethiopia?

17. Yes, they have announced they will participate, although not clear if that is at the federal level, the regional level or both. The assumption is both but I'm not clear if that's been decided.

Has ONLF now opened an office in Addis Ababa?

18. Yes, they have an Addis office from what I understand. They recently had a congress where they elected new leadership and discussed strategies for the upcoming election that would make them more appealing to Somalis outside of the Ogaden clan.

Do you have any information about ONLF-members who are still in prison in Ethiopia?

19. No, I am not aware of any that are still in prison for alleged ONLF activities or support. I imagine there are a few but certainly all the high-profile prisoners I'm aware of have been released, both from Somali region detention and Ethiopian federal detention more broadly.

To which extent have the Liyu police in the Somali region state been reformed?

20. They are in the process of being reformed, but significant progress has been made. Key abusive leaders were arrested, and some convicted, although the nature of the charges are a little unclear. Other abusive leaders left Ethiopia, including the head of the Liyu police, Abdirahman Labagole. Some others were just removed from their positions. Other long-standing but more junior members of the Liyu police went through new training, largely a reprogramming, including on ensuring their operations are human rights friendly. Many were released from those positions just before and after

that training. New recruits also joined, including former ONLF fighters, to be trained under a new command. Some ONLF intelligence officials or former SRS intelligence that had fled the country also took on senior positions. And a few key senior Liyu police/intelligence officials, including some implicated in abuse in the past, were given promotions.

Do they target ONLF-members in their current operations?

21. Certainly, the reputation of the Liyu Police in Jijiga and ONLF areas has improved dramatically. I am not aware they are going after any ONLF members, although like any transition I imagine there are cases of previously autonomous Liyu Police members acting outside of their new authority.

Who are they targeting in the Somali region, if any?

22. I understand there have been some clan-based conflicts where the Liyu Police are accused of taking sides, but I do not have too many details. There have also been regular clashes along the Afar regional state border between the Liyu Police and the Afar regional state special police as part of an ongoing dispute between the two regional states over border issues. Members of the Issa and Afar clans that live on either side of the disputed area have regularly clashed over the last 18 months. I understand the Liyu Police are also playing a role in securing the border with Somalia in absence of an effective federal presence.