RELIGIOUS POLARISATION IN ETHIOPIA:

URBAN CONFLICTS AND RESOURCES FOR PEACE

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MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK

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SUMMARY

- This report studies the role of religion in recent inter-communal conflicts in Ethiopia outside of Addis Ababa. While not entirely neglecting disputes and perceptions in the capital, it seeks to paint a fuller and more versatile picture of religion and conflict in Ethiopia by drawing together insights from four Ethiopian regional cities: Dire Dawa, Gondar, Hawassa, and Jimma. This is based on original research in these cities, most of which has already been published in separate reports.
- Comparing these divergent field sites, the report studies how religion and ethnicity interact in generating conflict, what role various socio-economic and political factors play, and to what extent inter-religious differences and intra-religious tensions amplify discord. In addition, the report offers a critical discussion of the contribution of religions in conflict resolution and prevention by considering the role of local inter-religious councils, religious and political leadership, and inter-personal engagements and encounters.
- This report goes beyond seeking to establish basic facts and data about the studied conflicts. While these are important, in particular where official investigations are missing or perceived to be lacking credibility, this study recognises that people's fears, hopes, and actions are determined by what they believe to be the case. This is why the main focus of the report lies in mapping out a variety of views and opinions across the different study sites in order to sketch out the (often competitive) diversity of contemporary perceptions of religion and conflict in Ethiopia.
- Consonant with insights from this research, the report conceptualises religion not as a separate social factor but as an embedded set of practices and beliefs that can never be fully disentangled from historical narratives, ethnic identities, settlement patterns, occupation and other social criteria. In all of the conflicts studied, religion thus acts in conjunction with other pressures on local communities and in many cases functions as a powerful conduit and catalyst in prompting conflict.
- This has important implications for governmental and non-governmental agencies seeking to engage religions in their peace-building work. Instead of furthering the simplistic juxtaposition of 'extremist beliefs' versus 'peaceful religion' more work must be done in enabling a contextualised, multi-factorial understanding in how religions operate in conflict or how they might offer an arena for peace. In particular, this means to invest in Ethiopian research capacity and to work in close proximity with local initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is a ubiquitous but often unspoken identity factor in Ethiopia. Across the country, religious affiliation is nearly universal. Almost everyone will associate with one of the big three: Orthodoxy, Islam, or Protestantism; most of the remainder is divided between Catholicism and traditional religions.[1] Of course, this is a measurement of affiliation rather than of personal piety or religious practice, but it shows how religion forms a regular part of people's social identity, alongside ethnicity or gender. In fact, mentioning one's religious affiliation is much less controversial than ethnicity, not least due to the fact that religions in Ethiopia are trans-ethnic and are therefore seen as a resource for peace. During our research, many of our informants maligned the emphasis of ethnic identity as part of the divide-and-rule politics of the previous regime, but understood pride in one's religious heritage to be uncontroversial.

Moreover, through various characteristics such as clothing, names, food, and demeanour, religious identity forms a legible part of a person's public persona, even as people know that this is not necessarily a measurement of private faith or lived religion. An informant from Jimma articulated this as follows:

> When you meet someone, you can identify which religion they are from. You can identify them based on their clothing style, hair condition, symbols and jewellery they use on their body, and their manner of speaking and greeting. [...] Some individuals look like religious men but their practical deeds may shock you a lot. And sometimes you find some individuals good in contrary to your initial perception about them.[2]

Such recognition of religious difference in inter-religious interaction is a daily affair in Ethiopia, in particular in the urban settings we studied. Owing to Ethiopia's long, complex, and not always peaceful history of inter-religious relations, people draw on a long heritage of convivial practices, such as arranging different diets and drinks at family feasts or sharing the public space between their expressions of worship. Moreover, there seems to be a tendency

1 The category of 'Other', which would encompass people identifying as non-religious as well as smaller religious groups like Rastafarians, is regularly measured below one percent. The latest (2007) census has it at 0.6 percent, equal with the last full Demographic and Health Survey (2016), Population Census Commission Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 'Summary and Statistical Report of the 2007 Population and Housing Census. Population Size by Sex and Age', Addis Ababa, 2007, 17, http://www.csa.gov.et/pdf/Cen2007_prelimineray.pdf; Central Statistical Agency, *Demographic and Health Survey 2016*, Addis Ababa: Central Statistical Agency, 2017, 42.

2 Interview with teacher, Jimma, Protestant, male, age 33.

to claim that inter-religious peace was the historical norm rather than conflict. In all conflict sites we studied, one of the most frequently encountered opinions was that the outbreak of inter-religious violence was an exceptional occurrence in a long-standing tradition of peaceful coexistence. The question then emerges: in what ways and through what social and political dynamics do religions become a site of conflict in Ethiopia?

The answer to this question lies in how religious affiliation is interwoven with other facets of social identity. As a result it is not always clear—both in conflict scenarios as well as peaceful day-to-day encounters—which aspect prevails in determining a person's belonging. In fact, people may oscillate in what they emphasise, depending on the situation. This is illustrated by the following quote from an interlocutor in Addis Ababa:

> Religiously I am a Muslim, ethnically I am an Amhara, and nationally an Ethiopian. Concerning my multilayered identities, there are practical experiences and questions that I encountered in my life. People ask me whether I feel more Amhara, Ethiopian or Muslim. I always wonder how people define me. Do people define me religiously, ethnically, nationally, or both? Sometimes I get confused about why people define me ethnically not nationally. More importantly, personal experiences related to my identity are the way I take lessons on how I negotiate my identity in different circumstances. I know what kind of people want me to display a certain identity of mine, and I know how to get along with whom.[3]

Given these complex identity relations, religious difference should not be understood as a fixed dimension of everyday relations but as a contextually situated act of noticing or demarcating boundaries. This makes it imperative to conceptualise the role of religion in conflict not in terms of a simple causal factor, for example in order to ask whether a particular conflict was 'really' religious rather than ethnic or economic in nature. Instead the question becomes how and in what circumstances do religious identity demarcations get drawn into conflict? How do they participate in mobilising a particular group, how do they amplify ethnic or political grievances, and how are they drawn on in determining where people feel safe and who they fear? This report seeks to study religion and conflict in such an embedded way, in order to elucidate how and in what circumstances religions amplify or channel conflict, and what this might mean for peace-building work.

After a brief discussion of the five main field sites and the project's methodology, the report will look at how religions interacted with a range of other factors in the production of conflict. This will be followed by a discussion of religious peace-building institutions and practices in order to identify resources for conflict prevention and reconciliation. We will conclude with some observations for how this research might inform programming in governmental and non-governmental organisations invested in peace-building and the prevention of conflict.

3 Interview with banker, Addis Ababa, Muslim, male, age 36.

STUDY LOCATIONS AND METHODOLOGY

In the past few years, the national conversation about religion in Ethiopia has been driven by clashes in multiple regional cities. This is why it was important for this project to be centred outside of Addis Ababa. We chose four different field sites with the aim of attaining a broad representation of religious diversity and conflict scenarios: Gondar, Dire Dawa, Hawassa, and Jimma.[4]

Gondar is the predominant historic town in Ethiopia's Amhara region. Iconic for its 44 monasteries, Gondar is firmly rooted in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, but as an old market town it is also known for its history of managing religious diversity through segregation. With rising religious plurality and an increasingly assertive Muslim presence in public space, tensions and clashes have ensued, most prominently in the deadly attacks of April 2022. With its historic significance and a strong presence of the Orthodox educationalist movement Mahabir Kidusan and of the Amhara-nationalist youth militia Fano, Gondar is an important site for understanding the relationship between religion, ethnicity and Ethiopian nationalism, as well as Christian-Muslim relations in the former heartland of the Ethiopian empire.

Dire Dawa is a flourishing business hub and industrial centre located in a Muslim majority area in proximity to the historic Islamic town of Harar. While the city has often been seen as a model of religious co-existence, ethnic and religious polarisation have increased in recent years, resulting in a number of violent clashes. While at first these were primarily understood in ethnic terms, they have most recently taken a religious turn in attacks on Orthodox processions during a religious festival. With its Muslim majority and ethnic plurality, Dire Dawa thus offers a contrasting image to Gondar and thereby offers a different angle to studying the intersection between ethnic and religious diversity in urban life.

Hawassa was founded as a new town in the 20th century and has since grown into the most important city of the south. It is predominantly Protestant with a sizeable Orthodox and a smaller Muslim population. Marked by high ethnic diversity, Hawassa is both the capital of

4 An additional consideration was that two other major sites of conflict, Mota and Shashemene, had already been covered by a different project this author was involved in, see Terje Østebø et al., 'Religion, Ethnicity, and Charges of Extremism: The Dynamics of Inter-Communal Violence in Ethiopia', Brussels: European Institute of Peace, 2021, https://www.eip.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Ostebo-et-al-2021-Religion-ethnicity-and-charges-of-Extremism-in-Ethiopia-final.pdf.

the former Southern Nations and Nationalities and Peoples' Region as well as of the recently independent Sidama Region. Sidama independence has come with significant ethnic clashes, which had a religious dimension in how Protestant fragmentation amplified ethnic divisions. This makes Hawassa another important site for understanding the multi-sited nature of conflict in contemporary Ethiopia.

As a historic and large city in the Oromia region, Jimma has a long history of inter-religious encounters. Surrounded by the predominantly Muslim Jimma zone, the city itself has a Christian majority (predominantly Orthodox). The city and the region have seen significant inter-religious clashes during the EPRDF period as well as sustained engagement in inter-religious dialogue efforts. Moreover, as a multi-ethnic city in a majority Oromo area, Jimma is also important for the study of ethnicity and religion, in particular with regard to the conflicts around the short-lived break-away synod of Oromo Orthodox bishops, which occurred during our fieldwork.

We did not neglect Addis Ababa entirely, but due to the complexity of the city, we limited ourselves to two recent conflicts. Firstly, we studied the heated conversation about the use of Meskel Square by religious groups other than the Orthodox church, which reflects national disputes over religious predominance and public visibility that we also found at work in the other four cities. Secondly, we looked into a small but violent attack by Orthodox Christians on Protestants in Akaki Kality sub-city that helps illuminate how religion plays into the borderline disputes between Addis Ababa and the surrounding Oromia region.

The project involved seven Ethiopian scholars, who conducted the research in these field sites.[5] The author of this report conducted a few interviews in Addis Ababa, but otherwise concentrated on background research, preparing the team for fieldwork, providing feedback on their interviews, and editing their fieldsite reports. The project also included two advisors, one each on Islam and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, in order to complement the project lead's own expertise in Ethiopian Protestantism.[6]

In almost all of the places studied, we were the first to conduct academic research on the respective conflicts. In some instances, there had not even been an official investigation, neither by the government nor by religious organisations. Often we had little more to draw on than media accounts and our own interviews. In some sites the continued precariousness of the situation even prevented us from verifying essential data, such as visiting religious buildings or obtaining government records. The pioneering nature of the project was best suited to the adoption of a qualitative design rather than conducting a representative survey of majority

5 In alphabetical order: Afework Beyene (Hawassa), Ameyu Godesso (Jimma), Fasika Gedif (Gondar), Girma Defere (Jimma), Kedir Jemal (Dire Dawa), Munira Abdelmenan (Addis Ababa), and Yihenew Alemu (Gondar).

6 Abduletif Kedir Idris (Islam) and Diego Maria Malara (Orthodoxy). Both offered invaluable comments on the project setup and its various outputs.

opinion. Moreover, recording the breadth and fragility of local perceptions of religious conflict is also essential for understanding and anticipating conflict in volatile situations for a different reason: People's future anticipations and actions are guided by what they believe to be the case, and hence the plurality of divergent stories is an important part of any conflict scenario.

We have endeavoured to recruit a wide array of interlocutors in each of the study sites, ranging from government officials and religious leaders to business professionals and labourers from lower educational backgrounds. We also ascertained that in each site we spoke to stakeholders from all major religions, regardless of local majorities; and we aimed for a similar variety in political opinion, ethnic background and other basic demographics such as age. Given that our team was predominantly male, we found it harder to access female interlocutors and spaces. As such, the project is more representative of the male-dominated public domain of religious conflict and peace-building, even as we were able to record opinions and narratives about inter-religious relationships and private celebrations. We have anonymised informants throughout to protect their identity.

During each interview, interlocutors were invited to describe and analyse the respective past conflicts, and we asked them to reflect on their own experiences of inter-religious conviviality in their given locality. Each conversation was fully transcribed and shared with the research lead in addition to brief field site reports about the research. With the exception of Addis Ababa, these interviews resulted in the production of detailed reports by the researchers.[7] This project synthesis draws in part on these reports as well as on independent analyses of the interview transcripts and an in-depth survey of religion in Ethiopia.[8]

7 Published to date: Yihenew Alemu Tesfaye & Fasika Gedif, 'Religious Conflict in Gondar: Local Perspectives on Polarization and Peace-Building', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2023, https://riftvalley.net/sites/default/files/publication-documents/Religious%20Conflict%20in%20Gondar_Final.pdf; Kedir Jemal, 'Religion and Conflict in Dire Dawa: Intercommunal Tensions and Opportunities for Peace', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2023, https://riftvalley.net/sites/default/files/publication-documents/Dire%20Dawa_Final_compressed.pdf; Afework Hailu, 'Religion and the 2018/2019 Conflict in Hawassa', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2023, https://riftvalley.net/sites/default/files/publication-documents/Hawassa%20Report_Final_compressed.pdf.

8 Jörg Haustein, Abduletif Idris, and Diego Malara, 'Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia: History, Politics, and Inter-Religious Relations', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2023, https://riftvalley.net/publication/religion-contemporary-ethiopia-history-politics-and-inter-religious-relations.

RELIGION AS A CONFLICT DRIVER

As set out in the introduction, religion is not easily disentangled from other social factors. This makes it impossible to isolate its role as a conflict driver in any 'objective' sense; people's identity and behaviour will always be driven by various motivations and obligations at once. Nonetheless, it is important to understand how our interlocutors themselves see the role of religion in relation to other conflict factors as this informs their relationship with fellow citizens and their anticipation of the future.

There are three main topics that arise from our interviews. The first is how people connect religious and ethnic conflict, both highly volatile topics in current Ethiopia as the country comes to terms with these two primary facets of its internal diversity. The second area of debate relates to what people identify as the wider causes behind the endured conflicts, and this gives an insight into their primary grievances about current politics and socio-economic fault lines. Thirdly, we will look at how people fault inter-religious differences and intra-religious divergence with producing conflict.

RELIGION AND ETHNICITY

Ethnicity is often seen as the primary conflict driver in contemporary Ethiopia and stands at the forefront of current political debate and analysis. This is justified, given the debates over the post-Derg constitutional arrangement of 'ethnic federalism' and the various military conflicts that have arisen during the tenure of PM Abiy Ahmed. At the same time, Abiy's invocation of religion in his political rhetoric has brought back to the fore religion as a form of political capital that can be mobilised for peace and conflict.[9] As such, it may be tempting for observers to sort the recent inter-communal clashes in Ethiopia into a grid of 'primarily ethnic' versus 'primarily religious' conflict. This search for a primary root of conflict, however, tends to overlook how ethnic and religious identities are interrelated and can even amplify one another in the genesis of conflict. This makes it pertinent to study the various ways in which both factors interacted in each of the field sites we studied, not least because of their marked differences in ethnic and religious composition.

9 Jörg Haustein and Dereje Feyissa, 'The Strains of 'Pente' Politics: Evangelicals and the Post-Orthodox State in Ethiopia', in *Routledge Handbook on the Horn of Africa*, ed. Jean-Nicolas Bach, London: Routledge, 2022, 481–94..

The 2018 and 2019 clashes in Hawassa are usually explained in terms of ethnicity, and quite rightly so. After all, the conflict arose from the popular demand for a Sidama national state, and clashes erupted both times during the celebrations of the Sidama new year, an auspicious event for Sidama culture, tradition, and political nationalism. The clashes themselves were clearly marked by ethnic violence, with Sidama youths persecuting and attacking residents of another ethnic group, first and predominantly the Wolayta and increasingly also Amhara, Silte and Gurage citizens as well. Yet on closer inspection, religion did play into the conflict as a catalyst in three ways. Firstly, Sidama nationalism, and in particular the New Years' celebrations, are linked to traditional divination ceremonies, and the elders of these religious traditions were involved in both stimulating and reconciling the conflict. Secondly, during the conflict religious difference on occasion functioned as a shorthand for ethnic boundaries: Inasmuch as the Amhara-Orthodox complex is locally identified with historic 'settler' elites from Ethiopia's political centre, Orthodox churches became proxy targets in Sidama attacks on the central state seen to be frustrating Sidama statehood aspirations. Finally, the religious similarity between Sidama and Wolayta (both majority Protestant) equally has had catalytic effects. Protestant congregations in Hawassa had previously become identified with Wolayta or Sidama nationalities to such a degree, that they function as an expression of ethnic division. This ran so deep that Sidama youth apparantly did not find it strange to sing Protestant songs while attacking their co-religionist Wolayta. All this shows how even in primarily ethnically demarcated conflicts, religion may still play an important role in channelling and amplifying underlying divisions. This makes religious institutions and rhetoric an important arena for conflict analysis and intervention, even where they do not appear to be the main cause.

The Gondar case, arguably, was a direct opposite to Hawassa. Here we studied a conflict that was widely regarded as an attack of Christians on Muslims and sparked Muslim counter-protests in various parts of the country. Accordingly, our researchers found a wide-spread perception in Gondar that a previous baseline of ethnic conflict had taken a religious turn when the earlier Qemant-Amhara conflicts gave way to Christian-Muslim tensions. Yet as our Gondar report makes clear, religious and ethnic identities had played equally into the inherited settlement patterns of the city, and for some of the minority groups (in particular the Beta Israel and the Qemant), there is some debate as to whether religious or ethnic difference is the primary line of community demarcation. Moreover, due to the general identification of Amhara ethnicity with Orthodox Christianity, the Christian-Muslim boundary line could take on ethnic significance. Though most of Gondar's Muslims seem to have been identified as Amhara in the 2007 Census, they would hardly have done so outside of official records, given the historical use of 'Amhara' as designation for Orthodox Christians in northern Ethiopia. A saying conveyed by one of our interview partners shows that this view still persists:

> The bulk of the population of Gondar now recognize themselves as being Christian and Amhara, but the Muslims in Gondar started to declare themselves as Muslims. If the Amhara are Orthodox, their slogan is 'አማራ ማለት ክርስቲያን ከሆነ እኔ ሙስሊም ነኝ' [if Amhara means

Orthodox, then I am a Muslim][10]

Moreover, in their political analysis, many of the Gondar study participants saw the inter-religious conflicts as a continuation of previous ethnic divisions. Blaming the TPLF for continuing to sow division in the region, they framed both the Qemant-Amhara conflicts and the April 2020 attacks on Muslims as an attempt to destabilise Gondar for strategic gain. While this opinion was hardly universal and is difficult to reconcile with the events, it shows how easily ethnic and religious divisions become conflated in popular understanding.

In Dire Dawa, too, there was a sense that ethnic conflict had given way to religious grievances. The underlying explanation that our research identified for this was a shift in the primary fault line of inter-ethnic disputes. Sitting on the boundary line between the Oromo and Somali regional states, Dire Dawa had been the subject of heated debates between both ethnicities. The political solution to this was to give Dire Dawa a special status as a chartered city, governed by an ethnic formula of 40:40:20 in the percentage of city offices going to Somali, Oromo, and other ethnic groups, respectively. As this came to be challenged by Amhara politicians in recent years, the conflict gained a religious dimension, pitting the Christian Amhara against the local Muslim majority of Oromo and Somali. Consequently, the annual *Ṭəmqät* processions became a major outlet for tensions, with Orthodox processions attacked in various quarters. Moreover, the clashes in January 2019 and 2020 became part of a general narrative of rising religious violence in the country, in particular as some of our informants saw the attacks on Orthodox Christians as a revenge for the violence inflicted on Muslims in Mota in December 2019. Yet the ethnic dimension was never absent entirely in how the conflicts were described. Multiple Orthodox study participants told us that their *Ṭəmqät* processions were attacked by 'Somali' while Muslim informants recalled that Orthodox youth had been wearing t-shirts with the image of Emperor Menelik at the procession in a clearly provocative gesture at the historical Amhara dominance over the country. Once again, it became clear that religious and ethnic identity discourses amplified one another with frequent code-switching between them.

In Jimma, by contrast, we looked at a case of long-standing Christian-Muslim conflicts and dialogue initiatives, in both the city and the surrounding area. In particular, our Christian study participants recounted the attacks of 2007 in vivid memory, often framed in arguments about the rising danger of 'Muslim extremism' and flanked by complaints about unequal treatments of Christians in the city. Accordingly, the attack on Muslims in Gondar caused considerable nervousness, with some fearing retaliatory measures and seeing their worries confirmed in a thwarted attack on two Orthodox churches. Despite the considerable ethnic diversity in the city, the topic of ethnic division came up in only a few of our interviews while religion was typically named as the primary social identifier. However, toward the end of our research the issue of Oromo clergy in the EOTC came sharply into focus and divided opinion in Jimma. Protestants also reported ethnic tensions with regard to a high church office. This shows how quickly the

10 Interview with University Lecturer, Orthodox, male, age 31. For a similar sentiment expressed elsewhere, see Østebø et al., *Religion, Ethnicity, and Charges of Extremism*, 28.

discourse can change and how religious institutions can become an arena for ethnic disputes, giving them a particularly charged expression. Moreover, the seemingly sudden emergence of such religious rifts also shows how the political tendency of associating religions primarily with peacemaking can stifle open debate on internally controversial issues until they erupt in plain sight.

In Addis Ababa, we studied a case case where an ethnic boundary dispute catalysed inter-religious tensions between Orthodox and Protestant Christians into open conflict. In April 2022, two Protestant churches were attacked in Akaki Kality sub-city, one belonging to the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (ECMY) and the other being a small independent Pentecostal church.[11] Several people suffered injuries, at least four of whom needed hospitalisation, and both churches sustained significant damage and theft. The ECMY congregation had been in the area for twenty years with seemingly amicable relations in the neighbourhood, so nobody anticipated such an attack. As one of our informants tried to make sense of this sudden shift in neighbourly relations, he offered a partially ethnic interpretation. A new ECMY Afaan Oromo congregation had been established very near the local Kidist Selassie Orthodox Church. This was not only in contrast to the Amharic services of the two other Protestant churches, but played into the wider disputes about the Addis Ababa-Oromia boundary in this part of the city.[12] The new church seemed to challenge both Orthodox and Amharic dominance over the area, and was the initial target of what appeared to be an organised attack.[13] When Oromia Regional State security forces dispelled the attackers,[14] their indiscriminate use of sharp ammunition led to the death of one youth. The protests now turned further inward into Akaki Kality sub-city, with the two Protestant churches forming a substitute target, and now the conflict was expressed primarily in the form of a religious claim over the area.[15] It is difficult to ascertain with certainty the motivation of the attackers, but it is clear that the religious and ethnic dimensions

11 Given that this was a fairly minor clash in comparison, there are not many sources about it and some we found closer to the time have since been removed. But we were able to verify some of the claims about destroyed property in person and through two interviews. See also 'Aanaa Aqaaqiitti gocha Finxaaleyyiin amantaa dawoo godhatan raawwataniin, lubbuun namaa darbee qabeenyi mana amantaa manca'e,' *Oromo Media Network*, https://web.archive.org/web/20220523223722/https://omnglobal.com/or/aanaa-aqaaqiitti-gocha-finxaaleyyiin-amantaa-dawoo-godhatan-raawwataniin-lubbuun-namaa-darbee-qabeenyi-mana-amantaa-mancae/; Sajid Nadeem, Tweet from 3 April 2022, *Twitter*, https://twitter.com/sajid_nadeem78/status/1510722562497875968?s=20&t=gQzgkbytXyXQA8Hg7t-rfg.

12 These disputes were also alluded to in one of the articles about the attack: 'Aanaa Aqaaqiitti'. The new Afaan Oromo congregation and the other attacked churches were on the Addis Ababa side of the boundary, inside the Ring Road.

13 One of the interviewed pastors claimed that the assault had been organised: attackers had come with three flatbed trucks from Addis Ababa, loaded with armed youths ready to attack.

14 If the claim is right, that this were Oromia state security forces ('Aanaa Aqaaqiitti'), then they would have been operating across the Addis Ababa/Oromia boundary, perhaps due to their proximity to the conflict.

15 The assembled worshippers apparently were asked by some of the attackers whether they believed in the Trinity (the patron of the local EOTC church) or Jesus (an allusion to the ECMY denominational name, 'the place of Jesus').

overlapped in the event.

As all of these cases show, the question of primary causation is not always adequate. Even where either inter-religious or inter-ethnic tensions appear to form a root cause, the expression of conflict was easily channelled into or amplified by the respective other dimension. In most of our interviews, we asked our interlocutors whether they believed people identified primarily with their ethnicity or religion and we found no agreement on this question in any of our field sites. Perhaps it is more adequate to assume that, particularly in volatile contexts, the primary question for our interlocutors is neither, but kinship and otherness, and that the parameters for determining communal belonging can change between locations and over time. One interview quote sums this up perfectly:

> If I have to be specific, Amhara Muslims carry two identities that are threats to their lives. In the Amhara region my people, the Amharas attack me for being a Muslim. The recent Gondar massacre is the biggest showcase of this. In Wollega we are killed for being Amhara. It is like I am not Amhara enough to the Amhara because of my religion and I am not Muslim enough to the majority Ethiopian Muslims because I am Amhara and they relate the entire ethnicity to being Christian.[16]

What this quote illustrates for the national conversation also came out in local settings. In times of rising inter-communal tensions, kinship and protection remained the primary quest for many, and whether this is expressed in terms of ethnic or religious belonging was secondary.

POLITICAL MANIPULATION AND SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS

In all the conflict sites we studied, we found a widespread notion of violent conflict being a recent development and the exception rather than the rule. Gondar was praised for its centuries of peaceful Christian-Muslim coexistence. The citizens of Dire Dawa were characterised as 'loving people' who embrace difference. Addis Ababa was noted for its diversity and tolerance. And even in Jimma people offered historical narratives that established inter-religious and inter-ethnic tolerance as the norm and conflict as a fairly recent aberration. Of course, these perceptions are selective and tend to eclipse past instances of violence and segregation, but they form an important anchor in how many people think about the conflicts. Rather than viewing tensions as endemic to the local ethnic or religious diversity, our informants tended to attribute them to political interests thriving on division or even actively sowing conflict. The notion that it was 'politics' that had ruined innately peaceful inter-religious relations was nearly ubiquitous.

Given the diversity of our interlocutors and sites, it is hardly surprising, however, that there was little agreement on what exactly these political forces were. Some attributed the rising violence to various foreign instigators from Saudi Arabia to 'the West', citing monetary flows, distorted media reporting, or direct political engagement as primary channels. Quite a few of our interview

16 Interview with a banker, Addis Ababa, Muslim, male, age 36.

partners blamed the TPLF and its alleged 'divide and rule' strategy for having sown the seeds of conflict while in power and continuing to utilise inter-communal differences as a destabilising strategy in the midst of the Tigray War. Others cited the Prosperity Party's mismanagement and instrumentalisation of religion as an underlying cause. Still others alluded to vague political interest groups as the primary power brokers behind all conflict. Quite frequently, interlocutors complained that religious leaders themselves were complicit in political manoeuvres, like the following interlocutor who even noted that the lines between religious and political leadership had become blurry:

> We are confused about how to refer to the Sidama government officials; they want to be both politicians and religious leaders at the same time. They cannot be considered government officials only, nor did they leave their office to become a religious minister. During public meetings, the Protestant Church leaders always speak only uplifting words about them. We sit there and just listen when they praise one another.[17]

In their general attribution of blame to 'politics' our informants tended to insert the experienced clashes into a narrative of general decline of conviviality. Each clash thus became a further piece of evidence for corrosive political forces across the country, with media-fuelled knock-on effects on other places, such as in the expectation of retaliatory attacks among Christians in Dire Dawa and Jimma after the assault on Muslims in Gondar.[18] Yet these larger stories about political decline too easily attribute inter-religious conflict and tensions to extraneous forces and tend to obfuscate how local socio-demographic dynamics contribute to inter-communal segregation, mistrust and tensions.

One of the most important socio-demographic factors is the numerical strength of the urban youth population. Already the 2007 census showed a very high proportion of youths (15–29-year-olds) in all the four sites we studied: ranging from 37.4 per cent in Dire Dawa and 39.6 per cent in Gondar to a staggering 44.6 per cent and 47.5 per cent in Jimma and Hawassa, respectively.[19] This proportion of youth in urban settings was always significantly higher in the city than in the

17 Interview with EOTC administrator, Hawassa, Orthodox, male.

18 One such apparent revenge attack had been reported from Worabe, capital of the majority Muslim Silte zone in the former Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region, where two churches had been burnt, see 'A wave of religious violence sweeps following the attack in Gondar', *Ethiopia Observer*, 30 April 2022, https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2022/04/30/a-wave-of-religious-violence-sweeps-following-the-attack-in-gondar/.

19 CSA, 'Population and Housing Census 2007', Census Tables: Amhara, http://www.csa.gov.et/census-report/census-tables/category/301-census-tables?download=653:amhara, 83; CSA, 'Population and Housing Census 2007', Census Tables: Dire Dawa, 20 http://www.csa.gov.et/census-report/census-tables/category/301-census-tables?download=656:diredawa&start=5; CSA, 'Population and Housing Census 2007', Census Tables: Oromya, 162, 227 http://www.csa.gov.et/census-report/census-tables/category/301-census-tables?download=663:oromya&start=10; CSA, 'Population and Housing Census 2007', Census Tables: SNNPR, 148, http://www.csa.gov.et/census-report/census-tables/category/301-census-tables?download=660:snnpr-merged&start=5.

surrounding countryside, with the difference varying between 11.6 per cent (Gondar) and 20.3% per cent (Jimma). Given the accelerated population growth and urbanisation trend in Ethiopia, these proportions are unlikely to have changed significantly since the census. Moreover, in all cities studiedm, youth unemployment was consistently above the average unemployment ratio.

In many of our interviews, youth were identified as the primary actors in inter-communal clashes. This was often linked to moral judgements about youth. Young people were characterised as too 'emotional', disrespectful to the elders, interested in personal gain only, or beholden to addictions and laziness. Accordingly, there was a sense that elders needed to teach and educate the youth about appropriate behaviour and inter-religious respect in order to prevent further conflict. Only some of our informants pointed to the economic challenges young people face and argued for the need of better government policies and intervention on their behalf. This tendency to moralise may indicate that young people's particular grievances in the contemporary economy are not fully considered. While the challenges of the current economy were mentioned in many of our interviews, there was little recognition of the outsized effect of financial struggles and un- or underemployment on youth and their future prospects. Nonetheless there was a broad recognition that young people presented a dormant political capital that was easily mobilised for conflict and all too often neglected by their religious communities. One elderly Protestant, who leads an NGO in Gondar, linked this to the corrupting influence of politics on religious leaders:

> But now that some religious leaders have started to get involved in politics, there is no longer any respect for them among their followers, and this has a negative impact on the process of establishing peace. I want to emphasize that those religious leaders must work hard to earn back their followers' respect. Before children and the young generation become a failure, families and religious leaders must work hard and invest in them.[20]

Linked with urbanisation is the fact that religious and ethnic plurality tend to be much greater in the cities than in the more homogeneous surrounding countryside. While some of our interlocutors praised urban plurality as enabling tolerance, the contrast between this urban diversity and the surrounding rural homogeneity could also lead to tensions. In Hawassa, the inherited ethnic plurality tipped in favour of the Sidama when the boundaries of the city were extended into surrounding Sidama territory and migration from the rural areas intensified. This gave rise to an even stronger claim of the Sidama on the city, and the demographic pattern continued to shift in this direction after the Sidama regional state was established with Hawassa as its capital. In Gondar, Muslims were a distinct but historic minority, surrounded by a nearly universally Orthodox countryside. As such, the visibility of mosques and the relative strength of Muslim merchants might appear as an out-of-place challenge to the Orthodox hegemony over the region. This contrast between urban plurality and rural homogeneity led one of our Muslim interlocutors to speculate that the 'mob' attacking Muslims in April 2022 must have come from outside Gondar and spurned local militias and Amhara nationalists into action. Dire Dawa, in

20 Interview with head of an NGO, Gondar, Protestant, male, age 69.

turn, not only had to facilitate Oromo and Somali claims by virtue of being a boundary city, but as regional economic hub also attracted a significant contingent of other ethnic groups and religions, and thereby became the contested object of multiple claims. In Jimma city, the Muslim majority of the surrounding countryside gives way to a larger Christian population, making the city a contested space for religious hegemony in the region.

These contested claims at a time of increased urbanisation make land for religious buildings and burial sites a very contested asset. We frequently heard complaints about unfair or unclear land allocations by public authorities. Moreover, different religious groups often vie quite directly over public space in strategically placed constructions of religious buildings, the amplified broadcast of religious services, or the occupation of roads and squares for religious festivals. Local discourse will often link this competition over public presence to claims of ownership over a particular place or neighbourhood, and from such contestations conflict may arise as the following three examples from our research illustrate.

In Addis Ababa, there was much controversy over the use of Meskel square in 2021 and 2022. Under Emperor Haile Selassie, the plaza acquired its name because it had become the city's convocation point for the Orthodox festival of the finding of the true cross (*Mäsqäl*). Every year, processions from various churches of the city converge here for a religious ceremony culminating in the burning of a large bonfire. During the Derg regime, the square was renamed 'Revolution Square' (*Abiyot Adebabay*) as part of the regime's effort to curb the influence of the Orthodox church and centre Ethiopian public celebrations on its political ideology. Even as the annual *Mäsqäl* festival continued to be celebrated here until 1988, the square's character now changed into a much-expanded staging ground for political parades. After the Derg was ousted in 1991, the square's original use and name were restored. The *Mäsqäl* convocation returned here, and though the square remained barred for use by other religious groups, political, cultural, and sporting events continued to be hosted here. A large-scale tax-payer funded renovation of the space, completed in June 2021, increased demands to open the square to celebrations by other religious communities. This was consonant with Abiy's frequent invocation of Ethiopia's religious diversity. Muslims were initially given permission to host *iftār* celebrations there in May 2021, only for it to be revoked at the last minute in reference to the not yet completed construction. Permission was given for a scaled-down celebration in the adjacent streets, but this ended in chaos when security forces disbanded the worshippers because overflowing crowds had tried to enter Meskel Square.[21] The (Protestant) mayor of Addis Ababa, Adanech Abebe, apologised for the miscommunication and defended the public use of the square for all Ethiopians. When Adanech repeated these remarks at a Protestant fundraising event in the

21 Bileh Jelan, 'News Analysis: Muslim Clerics demand accountability after security crackdown on participants of planned 'Grand Iftar'; Deputy Mayor apologizes', *Addis Standard*, 10 May 2021, https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-muslim-clerics-demand-accountability-after-security-crackdown-on-participants-of-planned-grand-iftar-deputy-mayor-apologizes/. A social media post by the Ethiopian embassy in the UK still tried to celebrate the event as a success, based on pictures of the earlier peaceful state of the celebration: Ethiopian Embassy UK, tweet from 12 May 2021, https://twitter.com/EthioEmbassyUK/status/1392447163557363725.

now officially reopened Meskel Square in January 2022, an Orthodox protest erupted and was dispersed by security forces, followed by a long dispute between the church and the city over ownership over the square.[22] Recalling this controversy, an interview partner in Addis Ababa showed what is at stake here for Orthodox sensibilities:

> [...] look at how the government is giving away what belongs to the Orthodox Church claiming the sites belong to every group of people. The recent protestant prayer and the Muslim street *iftār* on Meskel square is the epitome of the attacks on the church.[23]

A Protestant study participant, meanwhile, argued such claims to Orthodox ownership only invited competition by other religious groups, such as the provocative renaming of the square as Eid Square by Muslims or as Irreecha Square by Oromo traditional religionists.[24] Rumours about such names being displayed in the square have indeed tended to fuel the conflict.

Nonetheless, the *iftār* celebrations in 2022 and 2023 in Meskel Square have passed peacefully. The 2022 *iftār* celebrations were esecially tense, because they were held just few days after the violence against Muslims in Gondar. There, disputes over public space had turned into deadly clashes in April 2022. Tensions had been mounting over plans to hold public *iftār* celebrations, which the Christian majority saw as a provocation, in particular when a false rumour was spreading that the organisers of these celebrations had wanted to use the Gondar's Meskel Square as well. Violence initially erupted over a different piece of land when during a burial of a well-known local sheikh at a traditional Muslim cemetery, the mourners were accused of stealing rocks from the adjacent Orthodox church yard. Whether or not such an act of 'religious trespassing' actually occurred is impossible to verify, not only because of conflicting accounts but also because the city's authorities had refused to demarcate a clear boundary between both sites despite having been asked to do so multiple times by the Muslim community. In the ensuing dispute a grenade was thrown into the community of mourners, killing one person and injuring three others. While further violence was prevented by security forces at this point, the ensuing Muslim counter-protest in front of the city hall was perceived by some Gondar citizens as yet another form of 'religious trespassing;. The protesters had brought the body of the diseased with them and shouted 'allahu akbar' in the centre of the city. They were blocked by Orthodox youth and a violent clash ensued with 20 people killed, about 100 people injured and many, mostly Muslim, properties severely damaged. The territorial aspect is perhaps the most constant political parameter of this conflict, with perceived boundary crossings by the Muslim minority cited as explanation for every escalation. Clearly the Orthodox hegemony over public

22 Sajid Nadeem, 'Dispute over Meskel Square between Ethiopian Orthodox Church & Addis Ababa govt continues', *My Views on News*, 2 February 2022, https://myviewsonnews.net/dispute-over-meskel-square-between-ethiopian-orthodox-church-addis-ababa-govt-continues/. The EOTC claims to possess documents corroborating its legal ownership.

23 Interview with lawyer, Addis Ababa, Orthodox, male, age 26.

24 Interview with lawyer, Addis Ababa, Protestant, male, age 32.

space in Gondar was at stake for those engaging in violent behaviour.

In Dire Dawa the clashes during the annual Orthodox *təmqät* celebration in 2019 were also linked to assertions of territorial hegemony, with processions coming under attack when traversing through Muslim neighbourhoods. In our study we found that this was the culmination point of a longer process of religious and ethnic homogenisation in various neighbourhoods. Informants told us that as urbanisation accelerated, various ethnic groups began to coalesce in particular areas. The previous mixed character of the urban population faded as people adjusted to these patterns for their own protection. Members of smaller ethnic groups would be guided by their religion in the choice of settlement, moving into a Muslim or Christian quarter accordingly. The Somali versus Oromo clashes of 2018 already followed a largely territorial expression of fights between different suburbs, and in the same way various Orthodox processions from Christian areas to a joint meeting point came to be seen as a provocation when passing through now predominantly Muslim quarters. While it is important to note that for some of our informants these attacks on Orthodox Christians were linked to Christian attacks on Muslims elsewhere in the country, it took the perceived contestation of public space in the form of a religious procession for clashes to break out.

These examples show how urbanisation has contributed to the rise of inter-religious conflict in Ethiopia through increased pressure on land in the context of a very difficult economic situation, in particular for the predominant youth population. Cities thus function as catalytic spaces for Ethiopia's diversity contests: they amplify ethnic and religious plurality against more homogenous rural surroundings while at the same time increasing competition over public space due to the scarcity of land and shifting settlement patterns. Understanding these demographic challenges as causative is not to discount the political dynamics and religious rhetoric identified by many of our interlocutors as primary cause. Instead, they help understand why a particular political project, intolerant sentiment, or media report could resonate so strongly in urban environments.

INTER- AND INTRA-RELIGIOUS DYNAMICS

In addition to the religio-ethnic dynamics of community formation and the political and socio-economic context, it is important to consider how our informants saw the religious side of conflict: to what extent did religious identities, ideologies and disputes contribute to local tensions?

In our interviews we recorded numerous complaints about the posture and behaviour of a religious other. Muslims and Protestants tended to describe the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church as a powerful political institution that sought to protect its predominance in local settings and the country, thus undermining and hindering other religions at any cost. Muslims, in turn, were characterised by others as strategic and duplicitous, pursuing clandestine programmes of expansion. For example, the increasing number of mosques in Gondar was taken as evidence of a secret ambition to equalise the number of mosques with the city's forty-

four churches, while an informant in Hawassa contended that there was a 'strategic plan to Islamicise Sidama.'[25] Protestants, meanwhile, were often described as a disturbing presence, disrespectful to Orthodox beliefs and disruptive in the public sphere due to their habit of loud street preaching. In Jimma, we heard a case where Protestants were pursued as 'terrorists' for attempting to evangelise on the streets and in the aftermath complained bitterly that their desire to let 'people hear about Jesus' was misconstrued.[26]

These general perceptions formed the backdrop for more specific complaints in many of our interviews, such as provocative comments and inflammatory preaching. Muslims, in particular, reported such acts, ranging from hate speech on social media to local Orthodox preachers instructing their followers not to eat with Muslims. They also told us of provocative gestures toward Muslims such as spitting out in front of them or throwing away food that was given out for a charitable purpose. Orthodox Christians, in turn, complained that Protestants were attacking their beliefs in Mary and had attempted to undermine the church through sparking a Charismatic, pseudo-evangelical renewal movement among Orthodox believers. From Protestants we mainly heard how their rights were curtailed by the local religious majority, whether Orthodox or Muslim.

As already seen in relation to territorial hegemony, there was a widely shared sense that the real question was who dominated the country or a particular region. An Orthodox believer in Addis Ababa claimed that their large numbers during religious processions 'intimidated' the other religions, who now came after their symbolic public spaces; likewise a Muslim informant in Gondar alleged that Orthodox Christians had gotten more aggressive because they saw Abiy as a Muslim and feared losing control.[27] These suspicions about a broader power struggle between religions dovetailed with conspiracy theories that we also encountered in our research. In Gondar there were rumours before the conflict that Muslims had been importing weapons to prepare an attack.[28] In Jimma, an informant told us that the attempted attacks on two Christian churches had been staged by non-Muslims in Muslim dress.[29] In Addis Ababa we were told that 'most religious institutions are not only religious institutions, they are also places of political conspiracy.'[30]
These conspiracy theories and general complaints about other religious groups were by no

25 Interview with government employee, Gondar, Orthodox, male, age 40; interview with pastor, Hawassa, Protestant, male, age not stated.

26 Interview church leader, Jimma, Protestant, male, age not stated; interview with barber, Jimma, Protestant, male, age 32.

27 Interview with a broker, Addis Ababa, Orthodox, male, age 37; interview with high school teacher, Gondar, Muslim, male, age 60.

28 Interview with retired teacher, Orthodox, male, age 65.

29 Interview with mosque committee member, Muslim, male, age 66.

30 Interview with lawyer, Protestant, male, age 32.

means the norm or even the majority opinion in our interviews, but they do give us an insight into the kind of perceptions, fears, and rumours that get exploited and amplified during times of conflict. Their effect can be all the more devastating where day-to-day relations between members of different religions had eroded or even ceased, as we also found in our studies. While the ideal of inter-religious friendships and relationships remained high (see section 5.3 below), many reported a noticeable decline in this area or conveyed a sense of rising boundaries. We heard that sharing in one another's religious festivals had become less common, and while some pointed to the inherited normality of inter-religious marriages, others conveyed a strict sense of such relationships being out of bounds or potentially ruinous. It also seemed that many of our study participants avoided discussing faith matters with a friend or acquaintance from another religion. Some saw this as an act of respect while others surmised that everybody hides their 'true feelings' about another religion.

We also heard of newly emerging inter-religious boundaries in economic interactions. Some complained that landlords would only rent out premises to co-religionists, others suspected various forms of profiteering either through forming price cartels or generating outright profits through religious organisations. Neighbourhood associations, which collect and distribute funds according to need or on a rotational basis, appeared to be affected as well. In particular Edir, essentially a co-operative insurance policy for funeral costs, was mentioned by some interlocutors as newly affected by mistrust and religious segregation. It is worth noting, however, that this is not necessarily a new phenomenon due to the significant ritual dimension of funerals.

It is important to note that these expressions of rising suspicion, eroding friendships, or weakening economic ties were not universal in our interviews, but there was a sense that the grounds of day-to-day inter-religious engagements were shifting. It is here that open conflict could become particularly damaging, as the example of Gondar illustrates. Here we heard of serious disruptions and rising suspicions in personal friendships that took a long time to mend if at all. Moreover, economic divisions increased as well. In reaction to the endured attacks, Muslims kept their businesses shut for about two weeks. The ensuing shortages of basic food items highlighted how essential Muslim businesses were to the functioning of the city, and created a counter-movement among Orthodox Christians to establish Christian shops. We also heard of one instance where this was paired with instructions by a religious leader to avoid Muslim shops in future.[31]

An important factor complicating inter-religious relations and local conflicts is the intra-religious divergence within Orthodoxy, Islam, and Protestantism alike.[32] Given the previous

31 Interview with government employee, Gondar, Muslim, female, age 55.

32 For an overview, see Haustein, Abduletif Idris, and Malara, *Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia*.

government's long-standing politicisation of Islamic reform movements[33]—often addressed as 'Salafi' or 'Wahhabi' Islam by our interlocutors—it is not surprising that intra-Muslim disputes came up most frequently in our interviews, in particular in Gondar and Jimma. In Gondar, there was a tendency among Muslims to describe these disputes as regrettable but ultimately minor internal divisions on piety and religious practice, whereas Christians leveraged them into larger narratives about rising Muslim 'extremism'. We heard from an Orthodox informant that it was the 'Wahhabi' who suggested to hold a public *iftār* in the streets of Gondar, a proposal which (despite the earlier public *iftār* celebrations in Addis Ababa) he described as coming from abroad and which therefore was resisted by other Muslims in town.[34] Another similarly argued that these 'foreign' movements ran contrary to the traditional 'Ethiopian style' by introducing a new form of dress from Arab countries, a 'source of extremism'.[35] Another Orthodox informant linked local reform Islamic movements in Gondar with the leadership disputes in the national Islamic Supreme Affairs Council and speculated that this was somehow linked to 'radical members' of the Oromo Liberation Front—thus expressing an unease about national politics under a perceived 'Oromo' rule giving cover to new religious developments in Gondar.[36] Even the inter-religious clashes themselves were sometimes blamed on 'Salafi' or 'Wahhabi' extremists by Christian informants. One informant cited a particularly egregious conspiracy theory, arguing that 'salaried activists' from the 'Wahhabi' mobilised Orthodox believers against their fellow Muslims because the deceased sheikh, at whose funeral the first clashes erupted, was a Sufi.[37]

In Jimma, where Muslims form a much larger group and have political power, we found more open acknowledgement of internal controversy. While many still told us that the difference was mainly due to interpretative differences and should not threaten Islamic unity, there were Muslims who argued that the 'Wahhabi' influence came with Saudi money, who sought to take control over the local Muslim community and were 'fanatics' who brought violence.[38] Others similarly acknowledged a deep division but contended that this had been overcome.[39] In Dire

33 See Haustein, Abduletif Idris, and Malara, *Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia*, p. 20–21; Jörg Haustein and Terje Østebø, 'EPRDF's Revolutionary Democracy and Religious Plurality: Islam and Christianity in Post-Derg Ethiopia', in *Reconfiguring Ethiopia: The Politics of Authoritarian Reforms*, eds. Jon Abbink and Tobias Hagmann, Abingdon: Routledge, 2013, 166f.

34 Interview with retired teacher, Gondar, Orthodox, male, age 65.

35 Interview with university instructor, Gondar, Orthodox, male, age 32.

36 Interview with high school teacher, Gondar, Orthodox, male, age 52.

37 Interview with private agency employee, Gondar, Orthodox, male, age 49.

38 Interview with mosque committee member and local government advisor, Jimma, Muslim, male, age 66; interview with local sheikh and member of Muslim intra-faith dialogue initiative, Jimma, Muslim, male, age 78; interview with active mosque member, Jimma, Muslim, male, age 55.

39 Interview with mosque committee deputy leader, Jimma, Muslim, male, age 65; interview with Islamic teacher, Jimma, male, age 40.

Dawa, despite its significant Muslim majority, we only encountered one mention of 'Salafi' versus 'Sufi' debates in connection with the question of whether it was legitimate to celebrate the Prophet's birthday.[40] The relative absence of this particular debate can be explained by the fact that the main division in the local Islamic Affairs Supreme Council was over ethnic representation, namely whether a Somali or an Oromo should hold the leadership of the Council.

With regard to Orthodox internal divisions we found a similar pattern, although in noticeably weaker expression. Muslims accused the *Mahibere Kidusan*—an Orthodox youth movement focused on religious education[41]—of harbouring an extremist agenda and radicalising the youth.[42] Conversely, Orthodox believers presented them as more of an expression of internal diversity or debate. In Gondar, Orthodox believers even counted the Mahibere Kidusan among their assets because their 'studies' had 'disclosed the Wahhabi movement and their current actions in the city.'[43] This shows how the neo-traditional project of reviving and protecting the Orthodox heritage resonated in town and contributed to the heightening of inter-religious tensions. One Orthodox informant did see this risk, but nonetheless insisted that they were a minor 'societal problem' and could not be qualified as 'extremist' because they were 'less serious than the ustaz [Muslim teachers], who are newcomers.'[44] This was also echoed in the few remarks on the Mahibere Kidusan we received in Jimma and in Hawassa, where they were seen by Christians as an organisation that offered practical support, strengthened the church and had saved it from illegitimate innovations, while Muslims offered no comment on them at all.

Our Orthodox interview partners rather associated illegitimate innovations with the *Tehadiso* (renewal) movement. What originally was a controversial, but not very widespread adoption of some Pentecostal ritual forms and beliefs within an Orthodox setting, was now identified with all sorts of abberrant Orthodox religion by many of our interlocutors, even as it was unclear to what extent such a Tehadiso movement even existed in the locations studied. In Dire Dawa, Gondar, Hawassa, and Jimma, Tehadiso was almost exclusively mentioned only by Orthodox Christians and typically set in contrast to the Mahibere Kidusan—or to *Tewahido*, which is both a part of the name of the EOTC as well a word for unity or oneness. As such, Tehadiso was framed as an attempt to sow division and harm the unity of the church, with some informants

40 Interview with Muslim student, Dire Dawa, male, age 28.

41 On the Mahibere Kidusan, see Haustein, Abduletif Idris, and Malara, *Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia*, 28–29.

42 This was limited to voices from the capital however, which is likely due to the fact that there is much less of a national discourse about internal Orthodox diversity than about the divisions in Islam which had been exacerbated by the political adoption of a particular type of Sufi-Islam under the EPRDF, see Haustein, Abduletif Idris, and Malara, *Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia*, 21, 32.

43 Interview with university lecturer, Gondar, Orthodox, male, age 31.

44 Interview with high school teacher, Gondar, Orthodox, male, 52.

claiming that this was due to foreign influence and money. With two exceptions only, these were largely internal Orthodox deliberations, however.[45]

Among Protestants, there was a wide-spread recognition of internal divergence. In particular in Hawassa, with its Protestant majority and divisive church politics, competition between evangelical churches and their pastors was a frequently mentioned problem. In particular the emerging small churches and prophets were described as a significant challenge, with both sides engaging in mutual reprimands. Here as elsewhere, this was linked with corruption and politicisation entering the church as pastors were competing with one another over church members in an increasingly fragmented Protestant landscape. Nonetheless, here, too, there was a tendency to view this as an internal problem only, rather than link it to inter-religious conflict or extremism. It also seemed that the national split between the older Evangelical Churches' Fellowship and the newly formed Council of Gospel Believers' Churches had not yet fully reached the majority of Protestant believers, as the issue only came up in a few interviews with people involved in inter-denominational work.[46]

It seems that with all three main religious blocs, there is a lack of recognition of the extent to which internal debates and diversity impact inter-religious relations. We frequently encountered the use of terms like fundamentalism or extremism in describing groups within *another* religion, whether it be reformist Muslims, the Mahibere Kidusan, or Protestant prophets. We found no evidence in our research to support these mutual allegations of 'extremist' actors planning or orchestrating inter-religious clashes. Nonetheless, it is important to note these perceptions because they guide people's expectations and suspicions. As such, intra-religious divergence has turned up the noise and heightened inter-religious suspicions. People have become less certain of what to expect from a religious 'other' and whether their religious leaders are able to control and contain offending groups. Instances of conflict tend to deepen such suspicions as they provide an opportunity to speculate how an 'extremist' other might have caused, fuelled or staged a clash in lieu of a reckoning with offensive rhetoric and behaviour among one's own religious kin. Of course, this was not universally the case, and where such reckoning with internal diversity occurred, we found significant capacity of religious groups and institutions to work for peace. This is one reason why diagnoses of 'extremism' must be handled very carefully: their accusative utility which firmly locates blame on one side and enables simple explanations of conflict makes them a significant obstacle for inter-religious peace.

45 Interview with government employee, Gondar, Muslim, male, age 28; Interview with pastor, Hawassa, Protestant, male, age not stated.

46 On this split, see Haustein, Abduletif Idris, and Malara, *Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia*, 36–37.

RELIGION AND PEACE-BUILDING

A central aim of the project was not only to understand the different ways in which religion may cause, channel, or shape communal conflict, but also to survey in what ways religious ideas and institutions offer resources for conflict reconciliation and peace building. There are three main arenas or avenues which our interlocutors focussed on when discussing the role of religion in preventing and alleviating conflict: the work of the government-initiated Inter-Religious Councils, the actions of religious and political leaders, and the importance of day-to-day inter-religious conviviality in the form of personal friendships or relations.

INTER-RELIGIOUS COUNCILS AND DIALOGUE INITIATIVES

The Ethiopian Inter-Religious Council (IRC) was established in 2010 at the initiative of the Ethiopian government and forms the most significant inter-religious body in the country today. In parallel to the federal structures, it is organised from the national to the local level, which means we were able to speak with IRC representatives in each of our field sites. The national and local IRCs are made up of representatives from the major religious denominations, which turns them into more of an institutional apex body rather than a communally supported interfaith initiative.[47] That said, the effects of this played out very differently in each of the places we studied.

In Dire Dawa, we found the IRC in a rather challenged position. Under-financed and not well-furnished, the Council operates out of a government-sector building, which fed into a local perception of it acting like a 'government spokesperson.' Nonetheless, IRC members told us of their endeavours to demonstrate inter-religious unity and calm the situation by jointly visiting victims of the *Ṭəmqät* clashes and organising an inter-religious discussion event. The latter, however, only made tensions more visible when dissenting voices arose in the meeting, and an attempt by the IRC to edit out offending footage from recordings of the event looked like political manipulation and invited further protests. More recently, the IRC has focused on conflict prevention and managed to secure resources for conflict awareness training in Dire Dawa and surrounding towns. Yet again, these activities were reported only by Council members rather than the general public, calling into question their local reach. There also seems to be some unease about the fact that, structurally, the IRC does not adequately represent religious majorities in town. This is due to the fact that it operates as a collection of the main religious denominations rather than as a representative communal body. As a result of Christian disunity

47 For the members of the IRC and some complications that have arisen from the Protestant side here, see Haustein, Abduletif Idris, and Malara, *Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia* 49f.

the Council thus has six Christian representatives and only one Muslim—something that was repeatedly queried by our study participants, especially as there were some discussions as to who (or what ethnic group) should lead the Islamic Affairs Supreme Council and thereby represent Muslims in the IRC. This discussion shows the extent to which the IRC and its activities may struggle to find local acceptance and are easily seen as a political imposition rather than a useful interfaith initiative.

In Gondar, we found similar reservations toward the Council. Here, the politically mandated IRC had replaced a locally organised inter-religious committee, which severely impeded its acceptance. Informants told us that in contrast to the previous committee, the IRC members seemed disconnected from the realities on the ground and were seen as government 'spokespeople' rather than representatives of their religious communities. We found these views across all religions, along with a sense that this is why the IRC's dialogue initiatives did not succeed. This is not to say that all events organised by the IRC were rejected. In fact, informants did evaluate positively one particular gathering shortly after the April 2022 clashes, which was organised by the IRC and government representatives. Yet this positive evaluation rested on the invitation of respected religious leaders, and some study participants still argued that such top-down, mediatised initiatives were the wrong approach altogether. The following quote is a typical example for this view:

> I heard in the media that the city's Inter Religious Council were giving [a] press release. I didn't attend or listen to the discussion but I heard it in mainstream media as this was held in Gondar. However, the process of discussion or dialogue wouldn't bring lasting peace in my opinion. The conflict happened at the grass root level and the communities from the local level did not participate. The participants were only high level religious leaders and they released some saying in the media; I don't even know what they discussed in fact. While attempting to hold dialogue, the government has tried to calm the conflict with force.[48]

It is important to note that this stance also conveys the belief that dialogue initiatives can be successful if they are organised in an inclusive, bottom-up manner. In fact, quite a few of our interlocutors signalled their belief that inter-religious dialogue and coordination meetings do have an important role to play in conflict prevention and resolution as long as they are not political staging events.

In Jimma, there was widespread support for inter-religious dialogue in theory, but opinions were divided about whether formal and highly politicised initiatives like the IRC would improve inter-religious relations in the city or help avert conflict. One informant, who was adamant about the need to respect one another's religion and to live peacefully gave us the following assessment of organised interfaith:

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[48] Interview with government employee, Protestant, male, age 42.

> Concealing one's own feeling towards others and their religion, and pretending to respect them is a serious problem today. This characteristic is common among leaders of different religions; when they come together they act like as if they respect each other's religion, but when they are apart, they talk bad things against each other's religion. There are those who do not like the invitation (food) you provide for them when you come together to mourn a death; I experienced this problem personally.[49]

There were also complaints about the IRC being under-resourced and not well supported. At the same time, many informants were conscious of the long-standing dialogue initiatives in Jimma region after the conflicts of the early 2000s, including the paradigmatic role these dialogue initiatives had played for the whole country. Thus we also found opinions highlighting the importance of organised interfaith forums for peace and prosperity, though these were rare in specifics. Even the IRC members reported more symbolic actions, like praying together with PM Abiy Ahmed during one of his visits, rather than sustained programmes of conflict prevention or dialogue.

Hawassa was the exception in our study, with an overall positive evaluation of the IRC. This was because it came to be seen as a neutral arbiter in a conflict that ran mainly through Protestant churches, even being invited to adjudicate in ethnic disputes. With the reputation of religious leaders damaged and the conflict prevention mechanisms of the Protestant majority failing, it fell to the IRC to condemn the violence, facilitate reconciliation, and provide conflict prevention training. Therefore, the frequent complaint of a political capture of the IRC that we found in all of the other three sites and in Addis Ababa was not evident in Hawassa, and the Council did seem to enjoy strong local support. That said, even here, IRC members acknowledged that the Council's reach was limited and that it needed further support. This applied in particular to its core activity of working toward inter-religious peace as evident in the examples of resentment between religious groups in the city that also came out in our interviews.

Altogether it seems that organised inter-religious work suffers from the political attention it has received in Ethiopia. In many places this has led to significant capture by religious elites or government interests, with the frequent mobilisation of religious leaders for peace in the aftermath of conflict ringing hollow to many Ethiopians. This is not to say that such work is not needed, in fact, interfaith dialogue and organised inter-religious encounters, enjoyed much support as a general idea. Yet there is a clear need of a proper local embedding of such initiatives, drawing on respected local leaders without co-opting them for political messaging.

RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

In all our study sites, we found that a lot of power and influence was attributed to religious leaders, mostly in keeping their own flock in line, but also pertaining to local politics more widely. Like a double-edged sword, this expectation cut two ways: religious leaders were faulted

49 Interview with teacher, Jimma, Protestant, male, age 33.

with the deterioration of communal relations but they were also seen as instrumental to reconciliation and peace.

In Hawassa this double-sided perspective on religious leadership was particularly evident. Many of our informants saw the clashes of 2018 and 2019 as a failure of leadership. Elders of the Sidama religious traditions and some Protestant pastors were seen as having deliberately inflamed the situation through nationalist propaganda and youth mobilisation. An intense competition between pastors and churches made joint conflict prevention impossible and some of the older, respected Protestant leaders in town stood by quietly when the conflicts erupted. At the same time, we also heard of prominent examples where religious leaders publicly preached against hate speech and violence or even risked their own lives shielding persecuted minorities regardless of ethnic affiliation. As such, a post-conflict reckoning with leadership seems to have set in, where people began to distinguish good from 'fake' traditional elders, and where a new generation of respected Protestant leaders has emerged. Moreover, we found a clear critique of religious leaders involving themselves in politics as well as some evidence of religious leaders acknowledging their failings in the conflict and seeking to draw lessons from them in mutual collaboration through the IRC. Of course the dynamic of Protestant fragmentation and competition is likely to continue, and exploitative pastors remained an issue our interlocutors wanted to talk about. Still, the post-conflict scrutiny applied to religious leadership will hopefully help prevent similar conflict escalations in the future or at least strengthen the popular appeal of religious authorities working for peace.

In Dire Dawa we found a similar mix of reflections on religious leaders and authorities. There was a notion of declining respect, but at the same time informants tended to mention the same two or three influential clerics who had made a difference in bringing communities together. Informants reported that religious leaders managed to diffuse tensions by engaging with the youth. Even though such interventions were not without their own tensions, they were typically reported as successful in the end, like in the case of the peaceful *Ṭəmqät* processions in 2021, where at the advice of elders Muslim youngsters were seen passing out water bottles to the Orthodox Christians passing through an area that had seen violence in the year before. Therefore, good religious leaders were held up as examples to emulate, even across religious boundaries as this quote from a Protestant interlocutor demonstrates:

> Let me ask you something today is the funeral of the known shek in Harar. As we heard people come from all over the country. Why that is the case? You see that is the result of what he plant inside people. We have a capacity to influence people for better. Prepare the people to respect the other religion, avoid the negativity about the other. I said this because some people are not care in their teaching.[50]

In Gondar, a city still noticeably shaken and divided in the aftermath of the conflicts of April 2022, a more pessimistic image of religious leadership prevailed. Yet here, too, a number of

50 Interview with business man, Dire Dawa, Protestant, male, age 50.

informants mentioned two or three respected leaders who modelled inter-religious conviviality between themselves and thus were key to calming the situation. In highlighting both their incendiary and calming influence, religious leaders therefore still remained key to preventing further conflict for many of our informants. The following quote can be seen as typical for this sentiment:

> Religious leaders, in the context of their institution, play a significant role in maintaining the peace and security of the town. While some government authorities are unsuccessful even when they try, religious leaders have a greater ability to mobilize the populace and can be successful in making peace. [...] Overall, they are powerful and are listened to by the public despite not carrying weapons like government officials. Due to their involvement in various political actions, these religious fathers have recently started to lose such respect from their followers. Good religious leaders generally contribute significantly to preserving the public's safety and peace.[51]

This quite typical notion of a contrast between religious and political authorities was not meant to dismiss the responsibility of the latter. While we found many allegations of politicians instigating and benefiting from conflict, many of our interlocutors also recounted how their local administration had failed them in more practical terms. In Gondar, in particular, we were reminded how a failure of governmental institutions laid the foundations for the clash to erupt in the first place, because city authorities had ignored the repeated plea to create a clear line of demarcation between the Muslim cemetery and the adjacent Orthodox church. Here and in all other conflicts we studied, we heard of many failures of government authorities to prevent and contain violence, to protect all citizens equally, and to organise proper investigative and judiciary proceedings after clashes which would forestall misinformation and conspiracy theories. This often amounted to a demand for better governance and political leadership, from land administration and the regulation of hate speech to better policing and neighbourhood dialogue initiatives.

In Dire Dawa, by contrast, many of our interlocutors gave us a positive example of this in the current city mayor. This showed that people were not merely pursuing a blanket critique of politics, but were ready to acknowledge good governance where it happened. What was consistently critiqued instead was the conflation of religious and political interests or rhetoric. In the eyes of many of our informants, it was the alliance between religion and politics that led to disaster because one side could no longer hold the other to account. Thus, despite the near ubiquitous norm of religious affiliation, none of our informants condemned Ethiopia's secular political order or showed theocratic leanings in their endorsement of religious leaders. Rather, they saw religion merely as a potential arbiter in a complex social field when politics failed.

51 Interview with retired teacher, Orthodox, male, age 65.

IDEALS OF PEACE AND PERSONAL INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS

As set out above, many study participants tended to attribute conflict to political instrumentalisation, foreign agitation, or socio-economic frustrations. This allowed them to argue that religions were normally a force for peace and should not be blamed even when the conflicts themselves were framed in a language of religious antagonism. It is here where we found the strongest invocations of a long history of peace, often forgetful of conflicts in the past. A quote from a Gondar study participant is a typical example for such a narration:

> There was not one single instance of religiously motivated violence in Gondar in the past. Christians and Muslims used to live together without conflict, and our social life was inspiring. Even during our Eid holiday, we called the Christians to celebrate the holiday with us. Similarly, the Christians call us during their holiday, and we celebrated it together. This reminds me our old days when we were living together without recognizing any differences. We thought about each other and lived peacefully and collaboratively. For instance, when I was putting together a wedding ceremony in 2001, I tell you, during that period, we spent two thousand and five hundred birr to buy one ox for the Muslims and two thousand and five hundred birr to buy another ox for Christians and we all celebrated my daughter's wedding together.[52]

Such idealised memories shape people's expectations of normality and their aspirations for the future. In all of the field sites we studied, none of our informants were ready to accept inter-religious conflict as the 'new normal.' Regardless of their critiques of contemporary religious rhetoric and leadership and despite serious apprehensions about the future, our informants continued to see religions as an essential asset for peace and even key to restoring amicable inter-communal relations. This was the case for optimistic and pessimistic outlooks for the future alike as the following quotes illustrate:

> I still have hope in the religious leaders' efforts, but I have given up on the political leaders. As I previously stated, the Gondar community is cooperative and pays attention to what its religious leaders have to say. Therefore, as long as both sides cooperate with their recognized religious fathers, the two religions will live together as usual. I hope that everyone works to restore our peace including religious leaders, intellectuals, and politicians. But Politicians' interference in religious matters, though, may still be a concern.[53]

> Even in the past we had ups and downs, yet the community had certain values; we have a long history of religions existing together. But that dose not mean that it all goes smoothly. There were bad times at the national level and in Dire Dawa. and I expect the future to

52 Interview with High School teacher, Gondar, Muslim, male, age 60.

53 Interview with retired teacher, Gondar, Orthodox, male, age 65.

include the same.[54]

> I'm very concerned about the future of Christianity here in Hawassa and South in general. We have lost sight of our heavenly promises. We are much occupied with 'earthly' identity, which is really concerning. Ethiopia's Jerusalem is in a difficult situation.[55]

This norm of religious peace as the foundation of functioning societies was not just a theoretical proposition in our interviews, but filtered down to how people endeavoured to engage with one another especially across religious boundaries. Despite the various ways in which day-to-day inter-religious friendships and relations had deteriorated, we were given many examples of how people from various faiths protected one another and maintained their friendship, even in the midst of local conflict. Others told us how they always made sure not to offend an acquaintance or friend from another religion, or how they worked actively to restore an inter-religious friendship that had been affected by distrust in the aftermath of a clash. Even people who had little social encounters beyond their religious group found it difficult in interviews to withstand the ethical norm of inter-religious friendships as the following quote from Addis Ababa illustrates:

> I have the most segregated life, everyone I know is a Christian. Your question just reminds me of how much I have to work in this regard, diversity is good, right? But marrying someone who is not in my church is not in the package.[56]

The tensions running through this statement show how much of a commonly accepted standard inter-religious relationships still are in Ethiopia: the study participant mounts no defence of his 'segregated' life and even finds it necessary to draw a line in the sand against the still quite common inter-religious marriages in urban environments. The historical and ethical norm of inter-religious relationships still seems to be very much alive in Ethiopia even when its realisation seems a more remote prospect in a climate of rising suspicions and conflicts.

54 Interview with resident of unstated occupation, Dire Dawa, Christian, male, age 23.

55 Interview with religious leader, Hawassa, Protestant, male, age not stated.

56 Interview with health professional, Addis Ababa, Protestant, male, age 34.

CONCLUSION: KNOWLEDGE FOR PEACE

As this report has shown, religion in Ethiopia is interwoven with a variety of other factors in the generation and prevention of conflict alike. If this complexity is to be taken seriously, then religion should not be treated as a 'causal factor' that can be isolated and addressed separately in conflict analysis and prevention. Instead, religions had different roles to play in conflict generation, reconciliation and prevention—depending on their interaction with a number of other factors such as ethnic tensions, political power struggles, socio-economic challenges, and pressures on public land. This is not to discount the importance of religions in shaping conflict because religious sentiments were at times instrumental in escalating social tensions.

The findings of this report therefore amount to the insight that religious beliefs, practices, and institutions should be conceptualised not so much as causes but as conduits and catalysts for conflict. This means that religions provide a particular social space for conflict analysis and potentially prevention, but only if their interaction with a whole host of other social and political factors is taken into account.

More specifically, international and local actors seeking to engage with the religious dimension of conflict in Ethiopia should focus their efforts in the following areas:

1. **Improve conflict analysis and anticipation through localised, multi-factorial studies:** Ethiopia has a long history of ascribing ostensibly religious conflict to the influence of 'extremist' actors eroding the traditional 'standard' of inter-religious peace. This simplistic perspective was amplified by the securitisation of Islam under the EPRDF, leaving the country ill-prepared for local conflicts that had a religious dimension but did not follow the expected dynamic of a 'terrorist' attack on peaceful conviviality. As this study has shown, the involvement of religious actors and ideologies in local conflicts was determined by a number of contextual factors and political actors, offering a more straightforward and plausible explanation than the unsubstantiated accusation of 'extremist outsiders' disturbing the peace that we often encountered in our interviews. This is not to discount the influence of exclusivist and incendiary ideologies, rhetoric, and actions, but rather to reach for a more nuanced and contextually adapted question: why do such beliefs and practices gain currency at a particular time and among which constituents, and how do they help amplify ethnic, political, or socioeconmic grievances? As such, the presence or prominence of 'extremist' rhetoric becomes an indicator of a particular local nexus of tensions that

needs to be studied.

2. **Improve conflict resolution through supporting official investigations:** The common absence of official investigations and reports after conflict have contributed to the erosion of trust in the state along with the above-mentioned issues in local administration and policing. Even simple facts like casualties and damages remain disputed, furthering divisions and the politicisation of conflict. In the absence of proper police investigations and judicial proceedings locals resort to simple explanations offered through hearsay and on social media. Moreover, attacked minorities often see this lack of follow-up as evidence that only those in power are protected by their local government, leading them to seek help from allies elsewhere in the country. In such a post-conflict climate, conspiracy theories thrive and communal echo chambers harden. The presumption of hidden 'political actors' behind the clashes that we frequently encountered in our research is an expression of this dynamic. Local and international actors should therefore push for better conflict investigations and can offer their own research and publishing capacities to aid such efforts, allowing the victims of so-called religious conflict to be heard.

3. **Improve future reporting through investment in Ethiopian research capacity:** Due to the politicisation of religious conflict and inter-religious dialogue, there is relatively little research capacity to conduct such studies in Ethiopia. Moreover, there is no academic discipline of the study of religions at any of the country's universities. Scholarship on religions is instead confined to theological institutions, leaving no common arena for the socio-scientific study of multiple religions. For this project it was vital to recruit Ethiopian researchers with good local knowledge. Such researchers can be found in various other disciplines, and with guidance in projects such as this, they can acquire the necessary specialisation. More such capacity investment is necessary in the short and medium term, hopefully leading in the long term to the study of religion becoming an established academic discipline that will help unpack the multiple ways in which religious beliefs and practices interact with other social factors.

4. **Support conflict prevention through collaborating with civil society organisations:** Given the quite complex entanglement of religion with many other factors, it is not advisable for outside governmental and non-governmental institutions to involve themselves directly in local conflict prevention and resolution. Such organisations almost certainly do not possess the full lexicon of historical knowledge and contemporary sensibilities that local actors and dialogue initiatives operate with. Where active engagement beyond research is desirable, organisations should identify local institutions or religious leaders to capacitate and work through. One important aspect of such a collaboration could be one of 'translation' between different social or political spheres. Given the frequent political capture of local organisations and

religious leadership in the name of government-mandated dialogue initiatives, it is imperative to be judicious about how such collaborations between local actors and national or international organisations are set up and may be perceived.

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