



Regular Article

Targeting the unarmed: Why Tigrian armed groups committed violence against civilian Amharas during the war in northern Ethiopia?

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ABSTRACT

Targeting civilians is increasingly common in both interstate and intrastate armed conflicts. While there is extensive literature explaining why armed groups in civil conflicts target civilians—often those they may need for future support—this dynamic remains underexplored in the context of the Northern Ethiopian war of post-2018. Despite various studies detailing the harm inflicted by TPLF armed groups on the Amhara people, the motivations behind their targeting of Amhara civilians are not well understood. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the reasons behind the aggression towards civilian Amharas by Tigrian armed groups in the intrastate war in northern Ethiopia. Through interviewing individual victims, TPLF-ex-combatants directly, experts in the field, and analyzing diverse literary sources, the research uncovered that the civilian attacks were motivated by historical anti-Amhara narratives, the TPLF's oppressor-oppressed narrative, the TPLF's inherent nature of attacking civilians, and the utilization of such attacks as a military strategy to enhance its bargaining position in the conflict. The research findings suggest that most of the violence inflicted on civilian Amharas by Tigrian armed groups during the northern Ethiopian conflict were due to the TPLF's effective promotion of anti-Amhara narratives and propaganda among these groups, and the armed group's use of civilian violence as a war strategy to build their bargaining power. Therefore, the research recommends collaboration between elites and scholars in order to expose and create an opposing argument against the anti-Amhara narratives and demonization spread by outsiders and sustained by the TPLF within the country. The authorities should work to dismantle the divisive barrier among Ethiopians, erected by external forces and the TPLF, by fostering authentic national harmony and forgiveness, highlighting the importance of establishing fundamental values that can bring the country's diverse population together.

1. Introduction

Targeting civilians is increasingly becoming a major war crime in current armed conflicts. In this research, civilians are individuals who are not part of the fighting forces or recognized representatives of the opposing groups. Armed factions are more and more responsible for a large amount of violence aimed at civilians in warfare, with reports of brutal killings of non-combatants by the media on the rise (Hultman, 2014). Civilians face a continuous bombardment of violence from both government and non-government actors during the conflict. During periods of war, the frequency of innocent people being wiped out is increasing (Allansson et al., 2017).

Currently, it is not uncommon to witness the deliberate attacking of civilians, even though there are numerous domestic and international laws of war designed to safeguard them during times of conflict (Dettner,

2016). The escalation of civilian attacks by armed groups has emerged as a pervasive threat worldwide, driven by political instability, ethnic tensions, economic hardship, and the proliferation of weapons (Avis, 2019). In Asia, particularly Afghanistan, the Taliban's return to power in 2021 has been accompanied by reports of targeted assaults on civilians, especially those associated with the previous government or foreign entities (Qureshi, 2024). Similarly, the military coup in Myanmar has resulted in increased violence against civilians perpetrated by the military junta, including airstrikes on civilian areas and targeted killings of opposition members (Akram).

In the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Yemen, attacks on civilians by armed groups are rampant. The Syrian Civil War has seen numerous armed factions, including ISIS and various rebel groups, targeting civilians through bombings, chemical attacks, and sieges (Erum, 2020). The ongoing conflict in Yemen has also witnessed both Houthi

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rebels and the Saudi-led coalition carrying out assaults on civilian populations (Butcher, 2023).

In Africa, civilian attacks by armed groups are similarly widespread. In Nigeria, Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have intensified their assaults on civilians, particularly in the northeastern regions. These groups target villages, engage in mass kidnappings, and conduct suicide bombings (John, 2022). In Somalia, Al-Shabaab has increased its attacks on civilians, including bombings in urban areas and targeted killings (Mwangi, 2012). The Central African Republic continues to experience atrocities committed by various armed groups amidst ongoing conflicts fueled by competition over resources and power struggles (Okyere, 2021). In Mali and the Sahel region, jihadist groups have escalated their attacks against civilians, particularly in rural areas (Benjaminsen). Additionally, civilian attacks by armed groups have become increasingly common in Ethiopia and Sudan, where civilians are often targeted, leading to massacres and displacement (Kaufman, 2023).

Nevertheless, it is perplexing when armed factions engaged in domestic conflicts begin targeting civilians who could potentially be important allies in the future. It raises questions about how these groups justify committing violence against the very population they seek to govern (Kalyvas, 2001). Additionally, it is unclear how armed groups perceive any benefits from using violence against civilians to achieve their objectives. The nature of violence against civilians during domestic armed conflicts differs significantly from that in wars between states (Balcells). In interstate conflicts, parties may intentionally target civilians to undermine the enemy's morale and compel them to surrender. However, in internal conflicts, the rationale for using violence against civilians may not always be as clear-cut (Downes, 2006).

This research, therefore, aims to explore the reasons behind the targeting of Amhara civilians by Tigrian armed groups during the conflict in northern Ethiopia. The most destructive intrastate conflict in Ethiopia began on November 4, 2020, with an all-out war between the federal government and the Tigrian armed forces (Engida). As stated by scholars, the primary objective of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) during this war was to restore its political power (Alamineh et al., 2021). Historically, the TPLF was a dominant force in Ethiopian politics, particularly during the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) rule from 1991 to 2018. Following the rise of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his political reforms that diminished the

TPLF's influence, the group sought to regain its position of power and hegemony over Ethiopia through armed conflict (Dibu & Ahadu, 2020).

The origins of the Northern Ethiopia war remain contentious, with no consensus on whether the federal government or the TPLF initiated hostilities. Some scholars attribute the conflict to Ethiopia's asymmetric ethnic federal structure, alongside violence against Tigrian civilians by national forces and the new government's ethnic affiliations with the Amhara (Siyum, 2021). Others emphasize the TPLF's resistance to Abiy Ahmed's political reforms, which strained relations between the TPLF and the federal government which further exacerbating tensions in northern Ethiopia (Fisher & Gebrewahd, 2019).

The postponement of the 2020 national elections due to the COVID-19 pandemic added fuel to the fire. In September 2020, the TPLF held regional elections in Tigray, defying the federal government's decision to postpone all elections (Tronvoll, 2024). By late October 2020, both sides had begun mobilizing military forces in anticipation of conflict. The federal government viewed the TPLF's actions as rebellion, while the TPLF perceived the government's military preparations as an impending attack on Tigray (Blanchard, 2020). The situation escalated on November 4, 2020, when the TPLF launched a preemptive strike against a federal military base in Tigray, leading to a declaration of a state of emergency by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and a subsequent military offensive against the TPLF (MelicherováReisenTesfa).

In response to the TPLF's attack, government troops initiated ground operations and airstrikes against Tigrayan forces (Davies et al., 2022). Within three weeks, Ethiopian coalition forces made significant advancements, leading to the withdrawal of Tigrayan forces from Mekelle on November 28, 2020. Following this withdrawal, the federal government declared victory and established a temporary administration in Tigray, announcing plans for reconstruction (Abbink, 2021).

However, nearly eight months later, in July 2021, Tigrayan armed forces began advancing into the Amhara region after government forces had retreated from Tigray (Amnesty International, 2022). Over a period of five to six months, they exerted control over various parts of Amhara and committed egregious acts of violence against Amhara civilians, violating numerous international laws that protect civilians during armed conflict (Woldemariam). The extent of violence was alarming, with reports of mass killings including over 200 non-combatants in Chienna village, more than 600 civilians in Kobo town, and a massacre of villagers in Agamsa (Abbink, 2021).

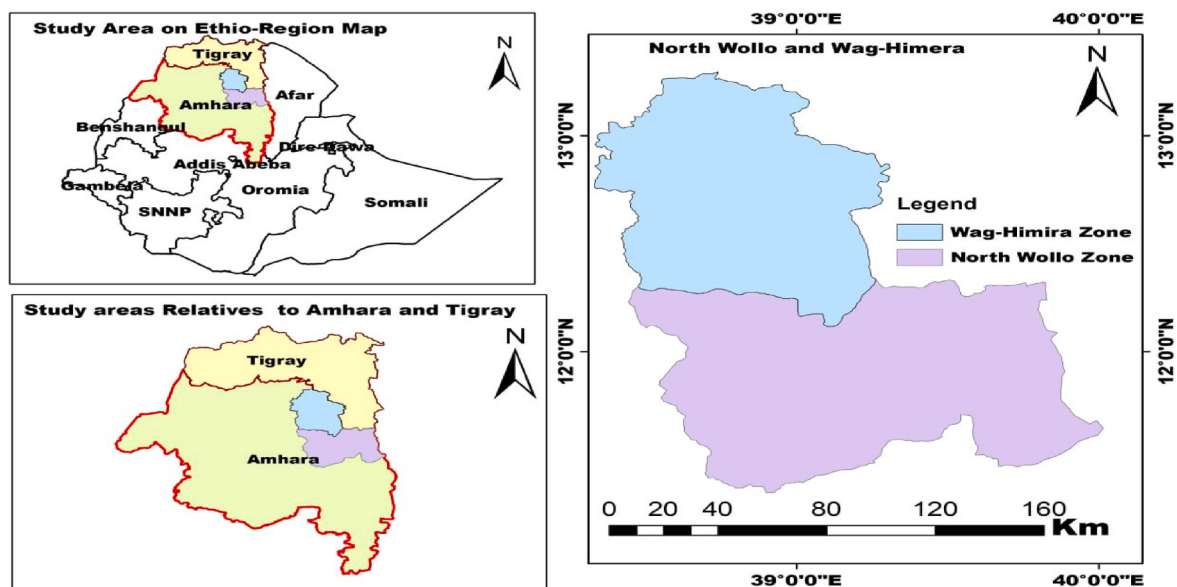


Fig. 1. Study area Map.
Source: Author, 2023

Eshetu Bereket (2021) documented that Tigrian armed groups engaged in acts constituting international war crimes during the conflict in northern Ethiopia. These acts included the intentional targeting and killing of non-combatant civilians, theft of property, and instances of rape and other forms of sexual violence against Amhara civilians. Similarly, Damtew and Ejigu (2022) reported that TPLF armed groups were responsible for the deaths of numerous innocent individuals, including the elderly, women, youth, and children in the Amhara region. Alaye (2021) further emphasized that these groups perpetrated serious war crimes against the civilian population of Amhara by violating principles of international humanitarian law throughout the conflict.

Despite the wealth of studies documenting attacks on Amhara civilians by TPLF armed groups, there remains a critical gap in research investigating the underlying reasons for the Tigrian armed groups' commitment to such egregious violence against Amhara civilians during the northern Ethiopia conflict. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding the motivations behind these actions and for informing future conflict resolution efforts. This is where the study adds value by addressing this mystery. Thus, the key objective of the study is:

- ✓ To investigate the reasons behind the Tigrian armed groups' violence against Amhara civilians during the war in northern Ethiopia from November 2020 to November 2022.

1.1. Theoretical and empirical significance of the study

This research seeks to shine a light on a deeply troubling and often overlooked aspect of the Northern Ethiopian War: the attacks by Tigrian armed groups on civilian Amharas. While many discussions around conflict and violence have been well-theorized, this specific case demands our attention and empathy. We are not just asking new questions; we are diving deeper into the complex web of factors that fuel this violence-factors like historical grievances, identity struggles, and the relentless pursuit of power.

By exploring these elements, we hope to enrich our understanding of ethnic violence and conflict resolution, especially regarding how non-state actors engage with state forces. Our research will reveal the tactics used by armed groups and highlight the devastating impact these actions have on innocent civilians who find themselves caught in the crossfire. It also compels us to reflect critically on how these groups justify their violence against those who are not combatants.

On a more personal level, we have gathered firsthand accounts and qualitative data to uncover the motivations behind these attacks. Are they driven by political goals, distorted views of history, or strategic calculations? Understanding these motivations is crucial for informing interventions that aim to alleviate human suffering.

Ultimately, this examination of civilian attacks within the context of the Northern Ethiopian War seeks to provide valuable insights into the complexities of ethnic conflict and violence. By deepening our understanding, we can better shape humanitarian responses and policy decisions. This knowledge is essential for grasping the intricate dynamics of conflict and contributes to ongoing efforts to prevent future violence and foster lasting peace. Through this work, we aim not just to analyze but to humanize the experiences of those affected by these tragic events, ensuring their voices are heard in the broader narrative of conflict.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Violence against civilians in an armed conflicts

This study examined civilian violence in intrastate armed conflicts, using the northern Ethiopian war as a case in point. The research characterizes violence against non-combatants as physical aggression aimed at civilian individuals or groups, leading to harm, death, or mental anguish, and also violence that ruins or harms personal

belongings.

Researchers utilize different terms to characterize violence committed against non-combatants, including civilian targeting, victimization, one-sided violence, and terrorism (Eck & Hultman, 2007). Recently, armed factions have been accountable for substantial violence aimed at civilians in times of armed conflict (Fjelde et al., 2016). This can be puzzling, as it indicates that factions struggling for control of the government often end up targeting the people they may need to support them in the future (Hultman, 2008). At times, understanding the violence we see in modern conflicts can be incredibly difficult. Hence, in this study, a variety of theoretical perspectives were utilized in order to gain a deeper insight into the research query.

2.2. Violence against the civilians in intrastate wars

Violence targeting civilians is a prevalent aspect of armed conflicts. As previously stated, it is puzzling why armed groups would target civilians during intrastate wars when they also kill civilians. This is due to the fact that violence towards non-combatants in civil wars varies greatly compared to civilian harm in wars between states (Balcels, 2010).

Parties engaged in interstate conflicts often aim to weaken the morale of their opponents by targeting civilian populations. In contrast, groups involved in internal conflicts may not always have specific objectives (Downes, 2006). Instead, armed factions in civil wars typically strive to demonstrate their capability to govern the nation effectively (Schachter, 1983). Additionally, during civil wars, these groups often focus on the populations whose support will be crucial if they emerge victorious (Kaufmann, 1996).

This study provides empirical evidence that supports these well-theorized concepts, specifically regarding why faction groups-the TPLF armed groups in this case, engaged in conflict with the federal government-commit acts of violence against civilians.

2.3. Why armed groups in Ethiopia target civilians: existing researches

Armed groups in Ethiopia have targeted civilians for various reasons, reflecting a complex interplay of political, ethnic, and economic factors. Here are some key findings that summarize the motivations behind these attacks. Armed groups may attack civilians due to ethnic tensions. Ethiopia is home to a diverse range of ethnic groups, and tensions between them have escalated in recent years. Armed groups may attack civilians from rival ethnic communities as a means of asserting dominance, retaliating against perceived injustices, or seeking revenge for past grievances (Yusuf, 2019).

Civilians are being attacked by the armed groups for political objectives. Many armed groups operate with specific political goals, such as seeking autonomy or independence for their ethnic group. Attacking civilians can be a tactic to instill fear, destabilize government control, or draw attention to their cause (Berhe, 2008). Armed groups attack civilians as acts of revenge against military actions or government policies perceived as oppressive or discriminatory (Woldemariam and Woldgabreal, 2023).

In Ethiopia, armed groups attack the civilians for the purpose of control and influence. By attacking civilians, armed groups aim to assert control over territories and populations. This can help them recruit members, collect resources, and establish local governance structures (Alamineh et al., 2021). The existence of weak state institutions in the country could be the reason for the civilian attack by the armed groups. The inability of the Ethiopian government to provide security and uphold the rule of law has created a power vacuum that armed groups exploit. In such environments, attacks on civilians may become a common tactic as groups vie for power and influence (Mohammed, 2020). However, the aforementioned studies are stating the general motives for armed violence against civilians in the country. They did not specify the issue to any of the armed groups in the country. Therefore, studying the

motives why the Tigrian armed groups in particular attacked the civilian Amharas during the northern Ethiopia war is found to be important for armed groups have varying motives to attack civilians.

2.4. Theoretical framework

The research employed various theoretical perspectives to uncover why the Tigrian armed groups resorted to violence against the Amhara civilians. The initial theoretical argument states that attacking civilians is a tactic used by armed groups to manipulate the government's actions and enhance their position in conflict (Wood, 2010). This theoretical framework clarifies the deliberate targeting of non-combatants in a war as a strategic military tactic to accomplish particular objectives against an enemy. During a war, conflicting factions may resort to using violence against non-combatants as a strategic tactic to shift the equilibrium of power within the armed group (Metelits, 2009). During an intrastate war, there is an uneven battle between the more powerful legitimate government fighting to maintain the current situation and the less powerful armed group challenging the existing state of affairs (Kalin). Non-state parties involved in a conflict may use violence to gain the government's attention and demonstrate their power (Wilkinson, 2006). Simply put, armed factions attack civilians when they perceive that the government depends on public backing, when they are unable to inflict sufficient losses on the government in combat, to elevate the government's political and military expenses, to demonstrate their strength and highlight the government's weakness to maintain the security it's people (Revkin, 2018). This theoretical framework assisted this research in elucidating the Tigrian armed groups' use of violence against civilian Amharas as a tactic to showcase their power and the government's inability to safeguard civilians.

The second theoretical approach employed in this research involves the theoretical concepts of symbolist political theory. Political Scientist Stuart Kaufman's theory, developed in 1996, highlights the vital role of intangible factors like group emotional state in driving violence from a social-psychological perspective. Supporters of this idea argue that group myths, fears of group extinction, and chauvinistic mobilization are explanations for extreme group violence like genocide (Kaufman, 2015). Symbolists believe in a "myth-symbol complex" that recognizes cultural elements and connects a group's interpretation of history while setting them apart from others. Myths are deeply ingrained in history and culture and cannot be easily dismissed. Besides, this theory proposes that it is emotions, rather than logical reasoning, that drive groups to engage in acts of violence. Individuals in positions of power who possess enduring myths have the ability to control the feelings of others and motivate them to take action. In combination with existing myths and ethnic differences, symbolic politics can result in ethnic conflicts or genocide through three key processes: widespread hostility, nationalist political organization, and a security dilemma (Gellately). Therefore, this theoretical framework assisted this research in clarifying how the untrue and damaging beliefs of the TPLF inspired Tigrian military factions to engage in severe violence against Amhara civilians during the conflict.

The third theoretical perspective employed in this research to elucidate why armed factions target civilians during warfare is associated with the rational choice framework formulated by sociologist George Homans (Homans, 1986). Unlike the symbolist theory, the rational choice model highlights the self-interests of the elite and the security dilemma as the primary factors behind the group's violence towards civilians. The wish to hold onto power and the fear of losing it in a setting of political and economic uncertainty results in social deviance and fragmentation (Obert & Mattiacci, 2018). Supporters of rational choice theory suggest an elite-predator model, which suggests that the general population is not inclined towards violence, but the elites are (Kaufman, 2006). This theoretical framework assisted this study in clarifying how the TPLF's desire to retain power and prevent power loss motivated Tigrian armed groups to perpetrate violence against civilian

Amharas during the conflict in northern Ethiopia.

The fourth theoretical perspective explaining armed groups' violence against civilians is connected to the argument of "ancient hatreds" (Schwartz, 1999), suggesting long-standing rifts fuel present-day violence. This theoretical framework could help this study in understanding how the historical spread of hate propaganda from outsiders and TPLF against the Amhara population played a role in inciting violence by Tigrian armed forces against innocent Amhara civilians in the northern Ethiopian conflict.

Among these theories, the rational choice and strategic theoretical approaches best explain the reasons for the civilian attacks by Tigrian armed groups during the northern Ethiopian conflict. While the other theories provide valuable insights, the rational choice and strategic context of these attacks aligns most closely with the motivations behind the actions of the Tigrian armed groups during the Northern Ethiopian War.

3. Study area and research methodology

3.1. Study area

The study is conducted in North Wollo and Wag-Himra Zones of Amhara region where there is a close geographical proximity to the Tigray region. Both North Wollo and Wag-Himra Zones of Amhara Region have a closer border with Tigray region in their northeast direction. The people of the two regions in these border areas have inseparable life styles and cultural expressions. It is among these people that the Northern Ethiopian conflict imposed unhealed wounds for the TPLF armed groups committed grave violence against the civilian of North Wollo and Wag-Himra Zones. When conducting this study, civilian attacks by TPLF armed groups, the researchers established clear case selection criteria and articulate the purpose of the study. Coming to the criteria, the study has a geographical delimitation to North Wollo and Wag-Himra Zones of the Amhara region where there have been high TPLF attacks on civilians was reported. Periodically, the study is delimited to investigate the reasons why the Tigrian armed groups attacked the civilian Amharas from November 2020 to November 2022, the duration of the northern Ethiopian War. The study tried to investigate the motives for targeted killings, mass violence, and lootings against the civilian Amharas by the Tigrian armed groups during the conflict. Thematically, the very purpose of the study is to analyze the motivations behind TPLF attacks on Amhara civilians during the northern Ethiopian conflict (Fig. 1).

3.2. Research methodology

To conduct this study, the researchers had first obtained an ethical approval letter of conducting the study. The researchers had also sought verbal informed consent from the study participants, who due to the political nature of the research topic choose to remain anonymous, and the authors documented the profile of participants in their note book carefully. To achieve the objective of this study, a qualitative approach is used. The entire framework of this study is based on the philosophical assumption of an interpretative paradigm.

The interpretive approach is a way of conducting research that seeks to understand the unique experiences and meanings individuals attach to their lives within their social and cultural settings (Lederer, 2010). Rather than just looking at numbers or statistics, this method dives deep into the stories behind human behavior and social interactions, helping us grasp the complexities of situations like the attacks by TPLF armed groups on Amhara civilians.

Researchers using this approach take a close look at the historical and political backdrop that shapes the actions of the TPLF and their interactions with Amhara civilians. They consider the weight of past grievances, the tensions between ethnic groups, and the shifting power dynamics at play. Central to this method is listening to the voices of

those directly affected—victims and community members—through interviews and focus groups, allowing their individual and shared experiences to come to light.

This approach also examines how various parties perceive the violence (Padrós, 2014). It investigates how Amhara civilians view the attacks and how TPLF ex-combatant members rationalize their actions based on their beliefs. By analyzing these narratives, researchers can uncover themes to understanding the issue under discussion.

What sets the interpretive approach apart from more traditional, positivist methods is its focus on the subjective nature of reality (Weber, 2004). While positivism seeks objective truths through measurable data, the interpretive approach embraces multiple perspectives and recognizes that people's experiences shape their understanding of the world.

In practical terms, while interpretive researchers gather rich, qualitative insights through conversations and personal stories, positivist researchers might rely on quantitative data like surveys and statistics to draw broader conclusions. The interpretive approach is more concerned with exploring "why" people behave as they do, whereas positivism aims to pinpoint cause-and-effect relationships based on observable evidence. Moreover, those who adopt an interpretive stance actively engage with their findings, interpreting data in a way that reflects human experience, while positivist researchers strive for a more detached viewpoint to reduce bias.

When it comes to understanding why TPLF armed groups target Amhara civilians, the interpretive approach offers a valuable lens. It enables researchers to delve into the intricate motivations behind these actions by connecting with affected communities and examining their historical narratives and perceptions of threat or injustice. This deeper understanding can indicate potential paths toward conflict resolution, reconciliation, and lasting peace in the study area.

In a nut shell, the approach allowed the researchers to better understand people's experiences in a particular setting. As a result, the study examined the historical and contemporary reasons why Tigrain's armed forces committed violence against civilians in the studied area. In this way, the researchers communicated thoughts, beliefs and ideas to the participants and provided an interpretation and evaluation of them. Regarding the research design, the study used a qualitative case study taking violence against civilians by armed groups during the war in northern Ethiopia as a case in point.

As a sampling strategy, snowball sampling and purposive sampling techniques were employed to access the research participants. While snowball sampling technique was used to identify people who were victims of war crimes and perpetrators, ex-members of TPLF armed groups living in the study area, purposive sampling was used to select scholars in peace and political science, and FGD discussants taking their expertise and experience of the violence crimes during the war. The snowball sampling is useful in sensitive contexts, like the case under investigation, where trust and safety are significant concerns. In this case, the researchers identified a small number of individuals who have direct experience or knowledge about the case. After gathering data from the initial participants, researchers asked them to identify other individuals who might be willing to participate in the study. These referrals include other victims, community members, and TPLF-ex combatants knowledgeable about the issue under discussion. This process continued, with each new participant being asked to refer additional individuals. In so doing, the researchers were able to select victims of the violence (12), ex-members of the TPLF armed groups (5), peace and conflict scholars (1), and Political Science scholars (2). Additionally, women (7), youth (9), and elderly (7) were selected for FGDs to complement and validate the data collected from interviews and document analysis.

As to the data sources concerned, the study used both primary and secondary data sources. While the former collected from interviews, reports, and focus group discussants, the latter gleaned from journal articles, books, and government and non-government organizational reports on the topic under discussion. Therefore, the study's data

collection methods included interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis.

Regarding data collection procedures from interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document reviews, the researchers used tailored methodologies for each approach. For interviews, the researchers defined their objectives and created a semi-structured guide with open-ended questions to encourage detailed responses. They identified knowledgeable participants, explained the study's purpose, and obtained informed verbal consent. Interviews were conducted personal-in a face to face manner-in quiet, comfortable locations, with detailed notes taken since recording was not permitted. The researchers encouraged elaboration through follow-up questions.

In FGDs, the researchers clarified their goals and developed a guide with key topics to facilitate discussion while allowing for organic dialogue. They selected a diverse group of 7–9 discussants, including women, youth, and the elderly, and explained the purpose of the FGDs to obtain verbal consent. A comfortable, private setting was arranged for open conversation. The researchers encouraged participation and managed group dynamics while detailed notes were taken. The researchers prompted participants to engage with each other's comments.

For document reviews, the researchers identified specific information needs and located relevant documents, such as academic articles, books and reports from governmental and non-governmental organizational reports, through online searches and hard copies. They thoroughly read the documents, noting key themes and findings, and created a data extraction form to systematically capture relevant information (author, date, and key findings).

Combining interviews, FGDs, and document reviews, the researchers gained a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Each method offered unique strengths—depth from interviews, interaction from FGDs, and context from document reviews—enhancing the validity and richness of their data.

Coming to the data analysis method, the researchers used thematic analysis method with its generic steps. Here the researchers, first, translate the data from Amharic language to English. Secondly, the researchers' categorize the data, making themes and developing emerging themes based on the study objective. In so doing, the researchers analyzed the narratives to identify common themes, and motivations to the violence against Amhara civilians.

4. Results and discussions

4.1. Why did the tigrain armed groups target the civilian Amharas during northern Ethiopia's war?

To address this question, the study used qualitative data collected in different ways and substantiated by different theoretical approaches and perspectives. While the study used the argument of "ancient hatred" to explain the reasons for the violence perpetrated against the civilian Amharas in relation to the historical spread of hatred inherited by the aliens externally and internally by the TPLF, the study used the symbolists theoretical approach to explain the reasons for the civilian violence in relation to the TPLF's false mythologies and chauvinist mobilization of the Tigrain armed groups. The study also used the argument of rational choice theory to explain how the intrinsic nature of the TPLF's political elites encouraged the Tigray armed groups to commit violence against the civilian Amharas. Finally, using the strategic theoretical approach, the study explained the reasons for the civilian attack by the Tigrain armed groups in relation to the needs of these groups to influence the government's response and strengthen their bargaining position during the war. Thus, the study presents the reasons why the Tigrain armed groups committed violence against the Amhara civilians during the northern Ethiopia's war in the following section.

4.2. Historical anti-Amhara narratives

The research found external creation of anti-Amhara narratives in history, which were then domestically fueled, leading to violence by Tigrian armed groups against Amhara civilians in northern Ethiopia's war. The Italian colonialist literature significantly enhanced the anti-Amhara narratives following their defeat by Ethiopian Patriots at the battle of Adwa in 1896 (Bitew, 2023). Out of the numerous works critiquing the Amhara people and Ethiopia, written by outsiders, Baron Roman Prochazka's book (Prochazka, 2013) stands out as a significant achievement.

The book identified Ethiopia as a challenge to white dominance and colonialism in Africa. Baron Roman Prochazka penned *Abyssinia the Powder Barrel* in the year 1935, pre-dating the second Italian invasion in 1936. The title of Prochazka's book in Italian is *Abyssinia, the Black Threat or Danger*. Of course Ethiopia was facing a "life and death struggle against the white race during the war of Adwa (Kebede, 2021). Prochazka argued that all colonial powers in Africa were targets of Ethiopia's attack without exceptions (Prochazka, 2013). In particular, Prochazka's book promoted xenophobia by stating that the Amhara ethnic group in Ethiopia is hindering Western expansion in Africa. Roman Prochazka depicted Amhara as savage, hostile towards white people, and at the center of the slave trade (Eshete, 2020). In his book, Prochazka portrayed the Amhara people as embodiments of evil and a barrier to Europe's aim of colonizing Africa. The Italian fascists planned to break up Ethiopia into different tribal colonies, with the Amhara tribe as the main adversary due to their expected resistance and defiance. Prochazka represented Amhara as an extortionist and slave driver who was universally hated. Prochazka was the pioneer in mentioning "self-determination" as a way to break up the Ethiopian State (Wachiso, 2023). Furthermore, an interviewee made with political science expert explained how the TPLF later implemented the Prochazka's idea in Ethiopia.

The division of Ethiopians and targeting of Amharas by the TPLF through tribal-based ethnic federalism after 1991 is based on ideas from Prochazka's book. TPLF remains dedicated to Roman Prochazka's mission of eradicating the Amhara. Hence, it can be accurately stated that the TPLF has replicated Roman Prochazka's book to eradicate the Amhara and divide Ethiopia, as their strategies are identical. Therefore, one could make the case that TPLF adopted the strategy of divide and rule tactics from the Italians. The false narrative about the Amhara people was instilled in the Tigrian youth by the TPLF, leading to tragic events during the northern Ethiopian war (KII3, 6 February 2023).

Likewise, academics asserted that TPLF was engaging in similar actions to the Italians during their power. Similar to the aliens, TPLF focused on creating conflict and division between the Amharas and other ethnic groups in Ethiopia (Yalew, 2014). TPLF has a comprehensive plan to eradicate the Amhara people and create the Greater Tigray Republic. Therefore, TPLF's roots are against the Amhara people (Liyew). Hence, it can be inferred that the recent assaults on civilian Amharas by Tigrian armed groups stem from the longstanding hostility between these groups, a legacy passed down by the TPLF from outsiders.

The anti-Amhara narratives that resonated with the Italians in 1935 have resurfaced multiple times in the members of the TPLF. For example, a prominent TPLF member named Sibhat Negga once declared, "Ye Amharanna Ye-Ortodox Tewahido biete Krstiann Akerkari Sebrenewal" essentially stating, "We have destroyed the strength of Amharas and the EOTC"! Sibhat Nega also stated that removing the Amhara and the EOTC would eradicate the chauvinistic government system completely. This reveals that the violence inflicted on Amhara civilians by Tigrian armed groups in northern Ethiopia is not arbitrary; it is based on anti-Amhara narratives created by outsiders and spread by the TPLF.

In its 1975 political manifesto, TPLF specifically stated that the Tigrian people's fight is against the Amhara (Berhe, 2008). Berhe

strongly contended that TPLF was working hard to dominate the other groups in Ethiopia, and or establish a larger republic of Tigray without considering the well-being of the Ethiopian people. Yet, the Amhara people and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), known as the "unionists," are hindering the TPLF's goal of breaking up Ethiopia and establishing a more powerful Tigray republic. This is the main reason why the TPLF saw the Amharas as its biggest enemies, which became evident during the conflict in northern Ethiopia. A member of the FGD discussants explained the issue in the following manner:

Since its creation in the 1970s, TPLF has been spreading its hatred towards the Amharas, passed down from the Italians, through the newspaper called Weyin, acting as its voice. TPLF argued in this newspaper that the Amharas are utilizing the EOTC as their primary instrument to uphold their hegemonic control. The Italians discovered that colonizing Ethiopia was unattainable without subduing the Amhara, just like the TPLF understood that dominating the other groups in Ethiopia, and or forming the larger Tigray republic was impossible unless the Amhara and the EOTC, known for their strong unionist beliefs, disappeared. This is the reason why TPLF strongly stated that they must eradicate the Amharas, who are seen as the "enemies" of their fight (FGD2, 08 May 2023).

The data explained above shows how TPLF adopted anti-Amhara views from the Italians and committed to continue the Italian influences targeting the Amhara community. To validate this data, one only needs to examine the declaration created by TPLF, which vividly illustrates TPLF's overt animosity towards the Amhara population (Alamineh). Hence, it is clear that the deep-rooted animosity incited by outsiders and supported by the TPLF encouraged Tigrian militias to attack Amhara civilians in the conflict in northern Ethiopia. This concept is akin to the ancient animosities reasoning used to validate past inter-group narratives and drive a group to engage in violence against non-combatants during a conflict (Shirlow et al., 2013). The TPLF's adoption of historical anti-Amhara stories from the Italians and the teaching of the Tigrian youth about it motivated the armed groups resorting to violence against Amhara civilians in the northern Ethiopia conflict. Hence, the severe violence carried out by these armed factions against civilians during the conflict is connected to the deep-seated and long-standing anti-Amhara feelings of the outsiders and the elaborate conspiracy orchestrated by the TPLF against the Amhara people.

4.3. The TPLF's oppressor-oppressed myth and its dehumanization of the Amharas

The Tigrian armed groups have been involved in violence against Amharas civilians during the post-2018 war in northern Ethiopia, a behavior linked to TPLF's dehumanization of the group and its oppressor-oppressed myth. TPLF strongly believes that there was a historical national oppression where Tigray was subjugated by the Amhara during the imperial era (Berhe, 2004). This myth of oppressor-oppressed dynamic was strengthened when the TPLF took power over the Ethiopian government after 1991, leading to increased violence against Amhara civilians, seen as the 'oppressor'.

The TPLF has displayed clear hostility towards the Amhara people, labeling them as the Tigrian enemy in their political manifesto. The TPLF taught the Tigray people that the Derg was oppressive and promoted the idea that "Derg means nothing but the Amhara" (Berhe, 2008). Due to the TPLF's belief in the oppressor-oppressed narrative, Amhara was prioritized as one of the main historical enemies of the Tigris (Endris). This is how TPLF started spreading hateful messages through songs such as "Amhara is a murderer", "Amhara is the Tigris' enemy" ... If you injure him, he is a "coward" (Mesganw). In addition, TPLF has a song which emphasizes that all the youth of Tigray must be prepared to cleanse their history even at the expense of their lives. For this case, the TPLF indoctrinated their people saying: *Ante Jegna tenes Ante Tigrie Tenes, Amharan Asadaew Gidelew Ende Keft* (You brave Stand!

You the Tigrian stand! Wounding the Amhara, kill him like a best).

TPLF heavily promoted a message of hostility, separateness, and bias via various mass media outlets such as radio and TV, and their political manifesto. Certain artists from Tigray also contributed to the dissemination of this propaganda filled with hate. Amhara was viewed as the adversary of the TPLF as they aimed to reinstate the repressive system of the imperial period (Plaut). An interview conducted with TPLF ex-combatant member explained this issue in the following manner:

During the conflict in northern Ethiopia, our attacks on civilians were driven by a mix of motivations. We aimed to instill fear within the Amhara community and send a clear message to both the federal government forces and potential supporters: we had the power to challenge the federal government. By demonstrating our capacity for violence, we sought to reinforce our authority and legitimize our cause in the eyes of the Tigrian community. Looking back, I realize that our actions were also fueled by a desire for retaliation against what we perceived as historical injustices inflicted upon us by the Amhara community. This sense of being wronged has lingered for generations, and it motivated us to commit acts of violence against innocent civilians. However, as I reflect on these events today, I understand that this cycle of retribution is deeply flawed and ultimately harmful. It's a painful realization that perpetuating violence only deepens the wounds of conflict rather than healing them (TPLF ex-combatant-interview1, 2 June 2023).

This interview data is supported by Simer Yusuf (2019) who argues that armed groups may attack civilians from rival ethnic communities as a means of asserting dominance, retaliating against perceived injustices, or seeking revenge for past grievances.

Furthermore, TPLF coined derogatory names to demonize and dehumanize the Amharas and develop a sense of superiority in the minds of the Tigrins. Thus they said:

"*Amharan Lik Ende Sigara Regten Tilenewal*" (We threw the Amhara like tobacco (Siye Abrha)). "*Amhara Sebl Lay Yetetabeqe Til Slehone Keyetgnawum Mengist Tequam Mementer Alebet*" (Since the Amhara is an insect that is inserted into a crop, it must be avoided from any governmental institutions (Tekle Hagos)). Similarly, the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, in the aftermath of the 2005 Ethiopian election, said "*Enezih ... Amarawoch Timhrt Liwesdu Yigebal, Selamawi Yemihonut Beklashnikov Bicha New*" (These Amhara "donkeys" need to be taught a lesson. They only become peaceful when a Kalashnikov is pointed at them) (Amanuel).

Once the Amharas are completely stripped of their humanity, the perpetrators are able to carry out any actions against them, as the Amharas are viewed as not belonging to any specific political, national, ethnic, or racial group but rather as separate from humanity itself. In his groundbreaking research on the psychology of genocide, Israel Charny describes dehumanization as the process of categorizing victims of violence as "not belonging to the human race" (Charny, 2012). The deliberate dehumanization of the Amharas was done to show no mercy towards them, resulting in serious war crimes against them during the conflict in northern Ethiopia.

Additionally, Sibat Nega, the TPLF mastermind, labeled the Amhara ethnic group as foes of democracy. TPLF is deepening the rift between the two groups by claiming that the Tigrins are gold and the Amharas are gun slandering. The myth-symbol complex led the Tigrian armed groups to target the civilian Amharas in the conflict in northern Ethiopia. The previous characterization and symbolism of the Amhara resemble the belief of Symbolist Political Theory, which suggests that group myths justifying hostility lead to extreme ethnic violence like genocide (Kaufman, 2006).

Hence, another factor behind the Tigrian armed groups' violence against Amhara civilians is linked to the TPLF's narrative of oppressor-oppressed and its promotion of propaganda based on hatred. The TPLF leaders used enduring myths to manipulate the emotions of armed groups, leading them to target Amhara civilians in northern Ethiopia's

conflict.

4.4. Attacking civilians as the intrinsic nature of TPLF

The analysis connects Tigrian armed groups' attacks on civilian Amharas during the northern Ethiopia war to the TPLF's underlying intention of hurt civilians. Participants of this study thought that during TPLF's time in power, looting, brutal, and inhuman treatments were commonly associated with the organization. In this instance, a participant of the study elaborated the issue in the following manner:

The hostility of Tigrian armed factions towards Amhara civilians during the northern Ethiopian conflict was driven by the TPLF's fascist anti-Ethiopian and anti-Amhara Tigre nationalism. Most of the TPLF's objectives involved undermining Ethiopia's strength by opposing the Amhara ethnic group and promoting the expansion of a larger Tigray. Therefore, the Tigrian forces carried out multiple war crimes against innocent people, exposing the TPLF's brutality and savagery. The Tigray armed forces was murdering a child in the presence of his mother, and raping wives in the presence of their husbands showing the cruel nature of the TPLF (KII4, 06 March 2023).

The data mentioned above is in line with the work of Thomas Mountain's (2020) on "Digging Own Grave: the End Days of Ethiopia's TPLF," claiming that the TPLF is a cruel genocidal dictatorship in Africa with malevolent and wicked organizational conduct. Another informant interviewee explained that the intrinsic nature of TPLF involves plundering and looting of resources:

Over the last thirty years, the TPLF has stolen many things from Ethiopia, specifically targeting the Amhara region. Throughout history, TPLF leaders have shown that plunder has been central to their strategies, as they have become skilled in engaging in wars and taking over neighboring lands to achieve their goals. The TPLF used plundering to establish an economic foundation and to further impoverish the Amharas, whom they considered as their enemies. In the war, the TPLF employed its army to unlawfully take all the government and public resources from various places like offices, schools, hospitals, construction sites, and rural and urban co-operatives. The fact that the Tigrian armed forces grabbed numerous resources during the war is not unexpected, as the TPLF also did so when it was in power (KII8, 14 March 2023).

The interview data mentioned above shows how resource looting is a defining feature of the TPLF both as a ruling government and as a belligerent force after 2018. The TPLF political elites are aware of and support the Tigrian armed groups' violence against civilian Amharas. This idea aligns with the principles of rational choice theory developed by George Homans (1986), asserting that the elite's self-interest, rather than the interests of the masses, drives the group's violence against civilians in armed conflicts. Therefore, the Tigrian armed groups violence against the Amhara civilians during the northern Ethiopian conflict is emanated from the intrinsic and malevolent nature of the TPLF.

4.5. Using civilian attacks as a military strategy

In this section, the research connected the reasons why Tigrian armed groups commit violence against civilian Amharas to their aim of influencing government reaction and boosting their position in the battlefield. As per a peace and security expert interviewed for this research, "the Tigrian armed forces used irrational and indiscriminate attacks on civilian Amharas as a tactic in their war strategy." This perspective agrees with Reed Wood's (2010) claim that violence towards non-combatants is a deliberate strategy to alter the balance of power in negotiations. To secure concessions from the government, non-state parties in conflict must showcase their power and weaken the government's capacity to safeguard its citizens. The data suggests that

the Tigrian armed factions used violence against civilian Amharas to enhance their chances of obtaining concessions from the government and to demonstrate the government's inability to protect the civilians. A conversation with a political science scholar during the data gathering process detailed the justification behind the Tigrian armed forces' use of violence against civilian Amharas in the way forward:

The Tigrian armed groups initially targeted civilian Amharas because they thought the Amhara community backed the government coalition force in the conflict. Their objective was to incite the populace to revolt against the government and its armed forces. Furthermore, the Tigrian military targeted civilians when they found it difficult to cause substantial damage to the government in combat. Actually, this approach resulted in political repercussions as the population mobilized and started resisting the Tigrian rebel forces. However, as there is a belief that views attacks on civilians as an attack on the state, the Tigrian military resorted to violence against civilians as a different tactic when they were unable to pressure the Ethiopian government to negotiate through military force (KII5, 16 April 2023).

Likewise, a TPLF ex-combatant, currently living in Amhara region, explained the issue in the following manner:

We were told to attack the civilian Amharas, by the TPLF political leaders and military commands, believing that the Amharas were supporting the federal forces and attacking the Tigris during the conflict. The TPLF political leaders were believing that it is when we attack the Amhara civilians that the people would realize that the federal forces could not secure them. Our military commands were told us that the people must know that the federal government has not the ability to protect them. It is at this time that the Amhara people could revolt against the federal government and stop its support for the national army. In doing so, the Tigrian armed groups were attacking the civilian Amharas to justify the government's weakness to protect the civilians (TPLF ex-combatant-interview 2, 12 June 2023).

Analogously, another TPLF ex-combatant argued the issue in the way forward:

... We were attacking the civilians for the purpose of intimidation and control the people. We used attacks on civilians as a strategy of instilling fear within the community, discouraging dissent and maintaining control over populations. Attacking the civilians were one of our strategy to establish dominance. It is not only, we were attacking the civilians with the aim of creating chaos and instability thus in turn undermine the federal governmental authority, and able to operate and expand our influence. Our military commands were urging us to attack the civilians to demoralize the national defense force and control public opinion (TPLF ex combatant-interview4, 16 June 2023).

Based on the above data provided, it can be argued that the violence carried out by Tigrian armed groups against civilians during the war is a strategic tactic to alienate the Amhara people from the government and to expose the government's inability to protect its citizens, showcasing the strength of the armed group. Hence, by employing the strategic approach as a theoretical basis, the research asserted that the Tigrian armed forces used violence against civilian Amharas in order to enhance their bargaining power and undermine the government's credibility in the war.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The study provides historical and rationalist arguments for why the Tigrian armed groups committed violence against the civilian Amharas during northern Ethiopia's war. Thus, the study argues that the violence committed by the Tigrian armed groups against the civilian Amharas is

rooted with the historical anti-Amhara narratives developed by the West's externally and the contemporary anti-Amhara discourses and demonization made by the TPLF internally. Furthermore, the study found that the TPLF's false myths and dehumanization of the Amharas, the TPLF's intrinsic nature of attacking the civilians, and the need for Tigrian armed groups to use violence against civilians as a military strategy to erode the government's legitimacy and increase their own bargaining power during the war were the main reasons for the case in point. In a nutshell, while other theoretical approaches offer important insights, the rational choice and strategic theoretical approaches provide a comprehensive explanation about the motivations behind the Tigrian armed groups' civilian attacks in the study area.

Therefore, the study recommends that the political elites and scholars altogether are expected to disprove and develop a counter-thesis for the anti-Amhara discourses developed by the aliens externally and propagated by the TPLF internally. Taking northern Ethiopia's war as a litmus test, the government in power has to work hard to eradicate false narrations and dehumanization against any group in the country with the introduction of genuine national unity and reconciliation philosophy. As the country is deeply divided by false narrations, a new social contract is needed to create core values that can bind the people together.

6. Lessons learnt from the case study

The study of attacks by Tigrian armed groups on civilian Amharas during the Northern Ethiopia War reveals a deeply troubling reality: the violence inflicted on innocent people. These attacks are not just random acts of cruelty; they are calculated strategies aimed at undermining authority and gaining an upper hand in a complex struggle for power.

What stands out most is the chilling intent behind these brutal actions. The goal is to instill fear, not just in those directly harmed, but throughout entire communities. By targeting civilians, armed groups aim to break the spirit of their adversaries, a tactic that echoes in conflicts around the world where power dynamics are skewed. Recognizing these strategies helps us grasp the broader implications of such violence and its devastating impact on society.

The long-term consequences of these attacks are particularly heart-wrenching. Beyond the immediate pain and loss, entire communities face the challenge of rebuilding trust and repairing fractured relationships. The scars of violence do not fade quickly; they disrupt social bonds and community cohesion for years, leaving deep emotional wounds. This reality underscores the urgent need for healing and reconciliation efforts, rather than merely responding to crises as they arise.

Moreover, this study highlights how armed groups often craft narratives to justify their violent actions, portraying them as necessary for a greater cause or as reactions to perceived injustices. This manipulation of truth can sway public perception, making it essential for us to critically examine these narratives and understand their implications.

Ultimately, the stories of those affected by the violence of Tigrian armed groups against Amhara civilians offer profound insights into the nature of attacks on innocent lives. By delving into the motivations and tactics behind such actions, we can better devise strategies for prevention, intervention, and fostering reconciliation in future conflicts. Each piece of data represents a human life—a mother, a father, a child—each one a family torn apart and a community in distress. These stories remind us of the true cost of war on ordinary people and the urgent need for compassion and understanding in times of conflict.

7. Limitations of the study

One of the challenges this study faces is its non-generalizability. In simpler terms, the findings we gathered may not easily translate to other situations or conflicts. The unique dynamics and motivations behind the violence in Northern Ethiopia are likely quite different from those in other regions or wars. This means that while our results are valuable to

understand why the TPLF armed groups attack civilian Amharas during the northern Ethiopia conflict, they might not fit neatly into violence elsewhere. Another hurdle came from trying to collect data from former TPLF combatants. This topic is incredibly sensitive, and many individuals were understandably hesitant to share their stories. They often worried about potential repercussions, stigma, or even legal consequences. However, the researchers worked hard to build trust with these individuals and able to collect data from them, explaining the purpose of the study and addressing any ethical concerns. Ethical considerations also played a significant role in the research process. Many civilian victims were reluctant to share their experiences, as they didn't want to revisit their trauma. Similarly, former combatants were cautious about participating due to fears of retaliation or legal trouble. Yet, through persistent efforts to clarify the study's goals, ensure participants' anonymity, and keep their identities confidential, the researchers encouraged everyone to contribute to this important work.

In conclusion, in acknowledging the limitations of generalizability, the study not only offers a more nuanced understanding of its findings but also paves the way for future research that can tackle these challenges head-on.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Belay Asmare Aragaw: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Kefelegn Tesfaye:** Resources, Data curation.

Statement of consent for publication

The authors of the manuscript gave the individual sufficient information about the content of the material to be published, including providing them a copy and discussing the implications of the publication. The authors explained that others may reuse and republish the information, and it would be widely available via the internet after it will be published. As a result, after they read the details of the manuscript, the participants of the study signed a written informed consent for publication. The consent letter is found in the hand of corresponding author of this manuscript and it is ready under reasonable request.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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