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Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations
On "Reviewing Current Developments in Ethiopia"

Ethiopia's Strategic Importance

US National Security Interests at Risk in the Horn of Africa

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss Ethiopia's strategic importance.

I will focus on the implications of Ethiopia's potential destabilization and present risks to US national security interests in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia is a key partner to secure US interests. I am aware of the current optimism about its trajectory on both human rights and peace with Eritrea. I want to share that optimism, but I must raise reasons for concern. There is a risk that local and regional conflicts, worsened by geopolitical competition, will destabilize Ethiopia and expose the weakness of partner-reliant US strategies. Direct US interests are at risk in the Horn of Africa, including the fight against al Qaeda and the Islamic State and freedom of movement in the Red Sea.

The potential for Ethiopia to destabilize persists. It faces a rapid political transition and ethnic conflict across multiple regions,[1] both of which challenge its stability. The new prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, has pushed through a raft of reforms and raised hopes of a new era of respect for human rights in Ethiopia.[2] Ethnic violence persists, however, much of it occurring on the border between Abiy's home region of Oromia and the Somali Region inhabited by ethnic Somalis, displacing more than 130,000 people.[3]

Sustained conflict risks mobilizing Ethiopia's Somali population, potentially creating a new opportunity for al Shabaab to recruit or even expand its attacks into Ethiopia. The Abiy government, which has continued mass arrests and internet blackouts even while making progress on other human rights issues, will exacerbate rather than solve this complex problem if it fails to manage it effectively.[4] Abiy's government also faces potentially destabilizing challenges from members of the former security establishment, which may be stoking the ethnic conflict in the Somali Region.[5] Longtime political elites similarly retain the power to derail core economic and political reforms that are required for a true democratic transition in Ethiopia.[6] Abiy is also likely to lose support from his own base if he fails to contain rising ethnic tensions or mitigate the high expectations placed on him as Ethiopia's first Oromo head of state.[7]

Instability in Ethiopia will undermine US efforts to neutralize al Shabaab, al Qaeda's Somalia-based affiliate,[8] and reverberate across the region. Persistent ethnic violence would draw Ethiopia's focus inward, away from regional peacekeeping commitments.[9] An internal challenge from anti-Abiy elements in the security establishment would have a similar effect. US operations alongside Somali and African Union peacekeeping forces have disrupted al Shabaab in central Somalia and improved security in Mogadishu, but they have not yet broken al Shabaab's hold on large areas of southern Somalia.[10]

These yet-to-be-secured gains will evaporate if Ethiopia, Kenya, or Uganda—the third of which faces an escalating political crisis[11]—falters and redeploys troops home. Ethiopia withdrew forces from Somalia due to domestic unrest in 2016, allowing al Shabaab to reoccupy parts of central Somalia.[12] Unrest in Ethiopia also limits its capacity for critical diplomatic engagements, such as the South Sudanese peace talks that it facilitates or negotiations with Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The GERD issue will spawn its own regional conflict if the Nile River states cannot reach an

agreement.[13]

The problem of the Salafi-jihadi movement, which includes al Qaeda and ISIS, must be considered alongside issues of human rights and democracy, as they are linked. AEI Research Fellow Katherine Zimmerman defines the Salafi-jihadi movement as "the ideological movement that holds that it is a religious obligation for individual Muslims to use armed force to cause the establishment of a true Muslim state governed under a Salafi interpretation of *shari'a*."[14] The movement draws strength from its relationship with Sunni populations by providing protection and governance to populations made vulnerable by conflict and societal disruption. Successes by local and regional Salafi-jihadi groups, such as al Shabaab, advance the global movement's objectives.

Instability in Ethiopia creates an opportunity for the Salafi-jihadi movement to expand. Ethiopia's conflicts typically divide along ethnic lines rather than confessional or sectarian ones, and the country has prevented significant Salafi-jihadi recruitment and attacks thus far.[15] Al Qaeda has a strategy of co-opting ethnic fighting and other local conflicts, however, and is strengthening with this strategy in West Africa and elsewhere.[16]

Both al Qaeda's and al Shabaab's ambitions extend beyond uniting even Greater Somalia, which includes parts of eastern Ethiopia.[17] Senior al Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan see the group as a vanguard for mobilization throughout East Africa.[18] The Islamic State could also turn to Ethiopia as an opportunity for expansion, particularly through online recruitment, leveraging a growing footprint in Somalia.[19] Legitimate and responsive governance for all of Ethiopia's people is required to both protect their human rights and inoculate populations against extremist organizations.

The rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea is another positive development that nonetheless raises threats to US interests. Ethiopia's decision to implement the 2000 peace deal with Eritrea has yielded diplomatic milestones, though Ethiopian troops have yet to withdraw from the contested border.[20] The rapprochement itself remains fragile, particularly if hardliners within the Ethiopian security establishment undermine the normalization of relations or if the demobilization of rebel groups fails.[21] The UAE's facilitation of the agreement also occurs in a dangerous context.[22]

Geopolitical competition is intensifying in the Horn of Africa, layering proxy conflicts onto existing fault lines and increasing the potential for instability even while generating some positive effects. The UAE's engagement is part of a larger strategic competition among Middle Eastern states.[23] Power plays among the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey have caused political turmoil in Somalia. These have weakened the Somali fFederal Government (SFG) on which the US strategy to counter al Shabaab relies.[24] The militarization of the Horn and the southern Red Sea region has already affected commercial trade and threatens freedom of navigation as more states establish competing military positions.[25]

Russia and China are also expanding their influence in the Horn of Africa, and the

Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement will likely accelerate this trend. Eritrea, emerging from isolation, will seek to establish strategic partnerships with states that will not balk at its authoritarianism.[26] It recently agreed to the construction of a Russian naval logistics center, part of a broader Russian effort to establish strategic military positions on the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.[27] Somaliland, which is rumored to be preparing to host a Russian base, will likely seek greater support as Eritrea's opening threatens to divert revenues from Ethiopian goods passing through its ports. Djibouti faces the same challenge. Diplomatic efforts have assuaged Djibouti's initial fears. The threat of isolation remains, however, and will likely drive Djibouti toward closer ties with China, which established its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017.[28] The rift between the Gulf states has also created power vacuums that China will attempt to fill.[29] Beijing also stands to benefit from its large role in the Ethiopian economy as Ethiopia privatizes.[30]

Experiences elsewhere have shown that supporting strongmen does not guarantee security. Ethiopia is no exception. In supporting Ethiopia, we must recognize that the redress of legitimate grievances and protection of basic human rights yield long-term security dividends. Investment in good governance and security also prevents groups like al Shabaab and the Islamic State from co-opting local grievances to their benefit. The US must weigh the value of outsourcing foreign policy objectives to partners against the potential adverse effects of those partners' involvement. The US must begin to shape its approach to Ethiopia by:

1) Using all available tools to help Abiy demilitarize his response to ethnic violence, resolve internal disputes, and conduct necessary structural reforms peacefully and acceptably to all sides; and

2) Ensuring that the US remains the sole guarantor of its interests in the region by not relying on the UAE or any other outside power to manage these interests.

Ethiopia is a critical country in an increasingly important region. The US must recognize the dangers of rapidly changing domestic and regional dynamics in the Horn of Africa to prepare for worst-case scenarios, even as we regard new developments with optimism.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

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[1] Protests have occurred in the summer of 2018 on the border between the Oromia Region and Gedeo Zone of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR), within the SNNPR region, and on the border between the Oromia Region and the Somali Region. See Paul Chaderjian, "Nearly One Million Displaced in Ethiopia Ethnic Violence," Al Jazeera, August 25, 2018,

https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/08/million-displaced-ethiopia-ethnic-violence-180825130344133.html; Charlie Mitchell, "Ethnic Violence Triggers Crisis in South Ethiopia," *National*, July 5, 2018, https://www.thenational.ae/world/africa/ethnic-violence-triggers-crisis-in-south-ethiopia-1.747553; Yonas Abiye, "AG Indicts Former Hawassa Mayor over Conflict," *Reporter*, September 1, 2018, https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/ag-indicts-former-hawassa-mayor-over-conflict; Start Network and ACAPS, "Ethiopia: Somali, Oromia and Tigray Displacement," August 31, 2018, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20180831_acaps_start_briefing_note_ethiopia_displacement.pdf; and Mu Xuequan, "Internet Connection Restored in Eastern Ethiopia After Three-Week Blackout," Xinhua, August 25, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-08/25/c_137416697.htm.

[2] Jenni Marsh, "Why Ethiopians Believe Their New Prime Minister Is a Prophet," CNN, August 29, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/26/world/abiymania-ethiopia-prime-minister-abiy-ahmed/index.html.

[3] Start Network and ACAPS, "Ethiopia: Somali, Oromia and Tigray Displacement."

[4] Xuequan, "Internet Connection Restored in Eastern Ethiopia After Three-Week Blackout"; and *Premium Times Nigeria*, "800 People Arrested in Ethiopia amid Fresh Regional Violence," August 23, 2018, https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/281105-800-people-arrested-in-ethiopia-amid-fresh-regional-violence.html.

[5] Prime Minister Abiy's hold on power depends in part on his ability to neutralize former regime leaders from the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and their allies. Cross-border violence between the Oromia and Somali Regions in early August may reflect efforts by anti-Abiy security elements to undermine the prime minister. Federal forces intervened in the Somali Region in response and later arrested the former president of the Somali Region, a longtime TPLF ally, for stoking ethnic conflict in the regional capital. A potential assassination attempt in June 2018 may also reflect efforts to remove Abiy from power. See Bronwyn Bruton, "Ethiopia and Eritrea Have a Common Enemy," *Foreign Policy*, July 12 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/12/ethiopia-and-eritrea-have-a-common-enemy-abiy-ahmed-isaias-afwerki-badme-peace-tplf-eprdf/; Borkena, "Former Intelligence Chief Became Fugitive as Ethiopia Issues Arrest Warrant," August 21, 2018, https://www.borkena.com/2018/08/21/ethiopia-issued-arrest-warrant-on-former-intelligence-chief-getachew-assefa/; Aaron Maasho, "Ethiopia Arrests Disgraced Regional Boss Accused of Rights Abuses," Reuters, August 27, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics-arrest/ethiopia-arrests-disgraced-regional-boss-accused-of-rights-abuses-idUSKCN1LC1QA; Allyson McCarthy, Andrew Larsen, and Emily Estelle, "Gulf of Aden Security Review," AEI's Critical Threats Project, August 13, 2018, https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/gulf-of-aden-security-review/gulf-of-aden-security-review-august-13-2018; and Associated Press, "The Latest: Police Say 6 Arrested After Ethiopia Blast," June 23, 2018, https://apnews.com/9b96e200a8ff405581ca396ae1e699d7.

[6] Hilary Matfess, "So Ethiopia's New Prime Minister Wants Real Democracy? Here's What Has to Change First," *Washington Post*, September 7, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/09/07/so-ethiopias-new-prime-minister-wants-real-democracy-heres-what-has-to-change-first/.

[7] The ethno-nationalist parties that comprise Abiy's coalition could turn against him or each other, particularly if ethnic violence continues. Oromo nationalist parties, which are consolidating into a bloc, will attempt to push Abiy toward policies that favor the Oromo. At risk is the fragile alliance between the Oromo and Amhara, Ethiopia's two largest ethnic groups, which was key to breaking the TPLF's hold on power and remains necessary for effective governance in the country. Engidu Woldie, "Ethiopia: Oromo Parties Mull over Forming Merger," ESAT News, August 31, 2018, https://ethsat.com/2018/08/ethiopia-oromo-parties-mull-over-forming-merger/; Awol Allo, "The Blood Flowing in Oromia Is Our Blood Too: Why Oromo-Amhara Solidarity Is the Greatest Threat to the Ethiopian Government," African Arguments, September 27, 2016, https://africanarguments.org/2016/09/27/the-blood-flowing-in-oromia-is-our-blood-too-why-oromo-amhara-solidarity-is-the-greatest-threat-to-the-ethiopian-government/; and Muktar Omer, "Can Contradictory Oromo and Amhara Political Aspirations Be Reconciled?," OPride, August 29, 2017, https://www.opride.com/2017/08/29/can-contradictory-oromo-amhara-political-aspirations-reconciled/.

[8] Katherine Zimmerman, Emily Estelle, and Matthew Cassidy, "Al Shabaab Persists in Somalia," AEI's Critical Threats Project, February 7, 2018, https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/threat-update/al-shabaab-persists-in-somalia.

[9] Ethiopia contributes the highest number of uniformed personnel to UN peacekeeping missions, primarily in Sudan and South Sudan. Ethiopia also provides more than 4,000 uniformed personnel to the African Union Mission in Somalia. See United Nations Peacekeeping, "Ethiopia,"

https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/ethiopia; and African Union Mission in Somalia, "Ethiopia—ENDF," http://amisom-au.org/ethiopia-endf/.

[10] Matthew Cassidy, "Al Shabaab's Vehicle-Borne IED Campaign: January 2017–March 2018," AEI's Critical Threats Project, April 13, 2018, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/al-shabaabs-vehicle-borne-ied-campaign; Jordan Indermuehle, "Al Shabaab Area of Operations in Somalia: October 2017," AEI's Critical Threats Project, October 17, 2017, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/al-shabaab-area-of-operations-october-2017; Katherine Zimmerman et al., "US Counterterrorism Objectives in Somalia: Is Mission Failure Likely?," AEI's Critical Threats Project, March 1, 2017, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/us-counterterrorism-objectives-in-somalia-is-mission-failure-likely; and AEI's Critical Threats Project, "Map of al Shabaab's Area of Operations," forthcoming.

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[13] Daniel Benaim and Michael Wahid Hanna, "Water Wars on the Nile," *Foreign Affairs*, August 9, 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2018-08-09/water-wars-nile.

[14] Katherine Zimmerman, *America's Real Enemy: The Salafi-Jihadi Movement*, AEI's Critical Threats Project, July 18, 2017, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/americas-real-enemy-the-salafi-jihadi-movement.

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[16] For discussion of how Salafi-jihadi groups stoke and exploit ethnic conflict in the Sahel region of West Africa, see Emily Estelle, "Warning Update: Threats to Mali's Elections Reveal Weakness of U.S. Security Policy in West Africa," AEI's Critical Threats Project, July 27, 2018, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/warning-update-threats-to-malis-elections-reveal-weakness-of-u-s-security-policy-in-west-africa; Tom Peters and Katherine Zimmerman, "The Salafi-Jihadi Base in the Sahel," AEI's Critical Threats Project, November 2, 2017, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/The-Salafi-jihadi-Base-in-the-Sahel; and Andrew McGregor, "The Fulani Crisis: Communal Violence and Radicalization in the Sahel," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 2 (February 2017), https://ctc.usma.edu/the-fulani-crisis-communal-violence-and-radicalization-in-the-sahel/. For discussion of how al Qaeda operates in different theaters, see Katherine Zimmerman, "Al Qaeda's Strengthening in the Shadows," testimony before the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, Committee on Homeland Security, US House of Representatives, July 13, 2017, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/testimony-al-qaedas-strengthening-in-the-shadows.

[17] Al Shabaab recently released a video in the Oromo language, signaling its intent to recruit beyond Ethiopia's Somali community. See Jason Warner and Caleb Weiss, "A Legitimate Challenger? Assessing the Rivalry Between al-Shabaab and the Islamic State in Somalia," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 10 (November 2017), https://ctc.usma.edu/a-legitimate-challenger-assessing-the-rivalry-between-al-shabaab-and-the-islamic-state-in-somalia/; and James Miller, "Al Shabaab in East Africa," AEI's Critical Threats Project, July 24, 2014, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/al-shabaab-in-east-africa.

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[21] Bronwyn Bruton, "Ethiopia and Eritrea Have a Common Enemy," *Foreign Policy*, July 12, 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/12/ethiopia-and-eritrea-have-a-common-enemy-abiy-ahmed-isaias-afwerki-badme-peace-tplf-eprdf/; and Hamza Mohamed, "Ethiopia Removes OLF, ONLF and Ginbot 7 from Terror List," Al Jazeera, July 5, 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/ethiopia-olf-onlf-ginbot-7-terror-list-180630110501697.html.

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[24] A diplomatic rift between the UAE and the SFG caused a parliamentary crisis and the end of an Emirati training mission in Mogadishu in April 2018. The UAE's support for individual Somali states, including the self-declared Republic of Somaliland, has also weakened the SFG. See AEI's Critical Threats Project, "Threat Update: April 10, 2018," April 11, 2018, https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/threat-update/an-israeli-airstrike-against-iranian-backed-forces-in-syrias-southwestern-homs-governorate-killed-four-iranian-fighters; AEI's Critical Threats Project, "Threat Update: April 17, 2018," April 18, 2018, https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/threat-update/incapacitation-of-libyan-strongman-khalifa-haftar-creates-power-vacuum; and Jacqulyn Meyer Kantack, "The New Scramble for Africa," AEI's Critical Threats Project, February 26, 2018, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/the-new-scramble-for-africa.

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[27] Russia is pursuing military cooperation with Sudan and has increased its influence in Egypt. Russia is also planning to establish a naval base in Somaliland and is constructing a base in Burundi. See "Russia and Sudan Look to Develop Military Cooperation," Middle East Monitor, July 16, 2018, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180716-russia-and-sudan-look-to-develop-military-cooperation/; Nataliya Bugayova with Jack Ulses, "The Kremlin's Campaign in Egypt," Institute for the Study of War, June 2018, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20-%20Russia%20Egypt%20Campaign%20-%20June%202018.pdf; Salem Solomon, "Russia-Eritrea Relations Grow with Planned Logistics Center," Voice of America, September 2, 2018, https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-eritrea-relations-grow-with-planned-logistics-center/4554680.html; Michael Rubin, "The US Needs to Recognize Somaliland Before Russia Does," *Washington Examiner*, August 22, 2018, https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/the-us-needs-to-recognize-somaliland-before-russia-does; and UAWire, "Media: New Russian Private Military Company Operates in Syria," July 6, 2018, https://www.uawire.org/mass-media-new-russian-private-military-company-in-syria.

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[29] China offered to deploy troops to Doumeira Island in the Red Sea, which Djibouti and Eritrea both claim, after the withdrawal of Qatari cease-fire monitors in June 2017 nearly led to armed conflict. Abdi, "A Dangerous Gulf in the Horn."

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