TAL SHIAR DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE REPORT

UNCLASSIFIED//AOR ETHIOPIA, TPLF

Tigray Launches Large-Scale Offensive Against Ethiopian Government, Breaking 2022 Pretoria Peace Deal

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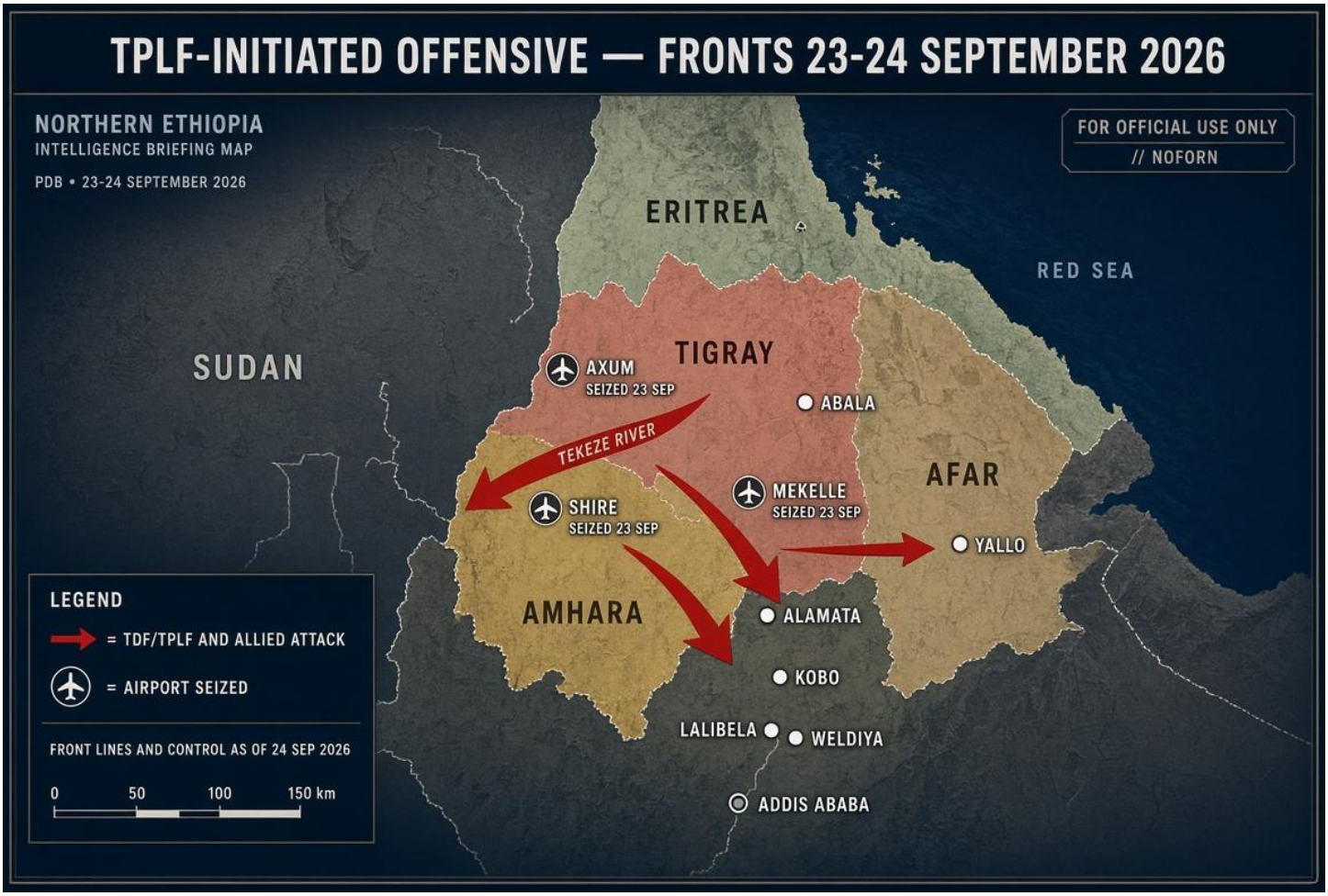
We assess that Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) forces initiated a premeditated, large-scale offensive on 23 September against the Ethiopian government. This offensive is not spontaneous and the public statement of it being a "defensive war" is political cover. TPLF is entering this round with more allies but less cohesion. That mix favors a multi-theater insurgency over a single decisive campaign. Federal forces hold the edge in drones and manpower. Unresolved western and southern Tigray land claims, unpaid veterans, forced recruitment, and a TPLF split all cut against a 2020-style mass mobilization. TPLF will likely make some initial gains but will suffer from attrition, internal divisions and will be unable to seize the capital, Addis Ababa, from government forces.



- The political step came three days before the offensive. On 20–21 September the TPLF and six other armed groups announced the Ethiopian Peoples' Forces Alliance for Survival, with the stated aim of removing Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and installing a transitional government. TPLF spokesman Michael Asgedom told Al Jazeera it was "the right time to eradicate the regime."

- On 23 September Tigrayan forces seized the federally administered airports at Mekelle, Axum, and Shire and detained federal police. Ethiopian Airlines suspended flights. That same morning TPLF units pushed into Afar and Amhara with local partners, including the Amhara Fano National Movement. Getachew Reda wrote that the TPLF "politico-military leadership has obviously taken irresponsibility to new heights."

- U.S. Ambassador Ervin Massinga stated on 23 September he was “disappointed to see the leadership of the TPLF, that the U.S. sanctioned earlier this year, make the poor decision to launch a large-scale offensive today.” He added that rejecting AU dialogue under Olusegun Obasanjo and “engaging in an unwinnable fight does nothing for the people.” Other armed groups, he said, “would be wise to avoid this.”



Northern Ethiopia fighting fronts, 23–24 September 2026. Tigrayan forces seized Mekelle, Axum, and Shire airports and opened attacks into Afar and Amhara

Reasons, Objectives, and Likely Outcome

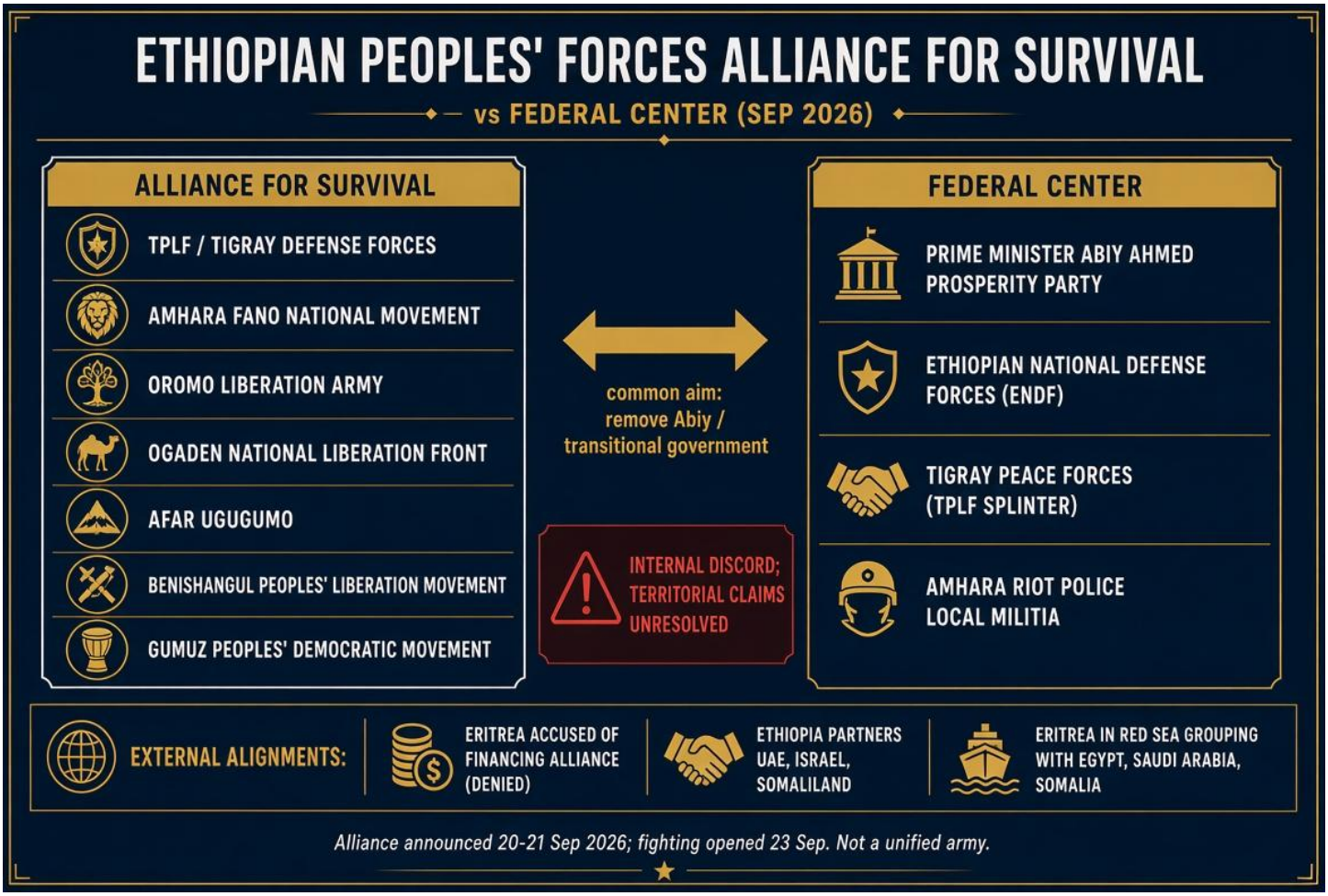
We assess the TPLF attacked now because the Pretoria deal no longer served their interests as a hardline faction had retaken Mekelle, and Abiy looked vulnerable. The objectives stack in layers: defend Tigray areas, pry open two neighboring regions with Fano, and convert that pressure into Prime Minister Abiy’s removal. The likely outcome is a stalled northern war. TPLF can hold the Tigray interior and seize border towns. TPLF lacks the internal cohesion, numbers and logistics to unseat the federal govrnment. The dangerous variant is external: Eritrean supply plus a second Alliance front outside the north.

- **Reasons**. Pretoria peace deal froze the 2020–22 war but left the core disputes alive: western and southern Tigray broke off from central government control, roughly 750,000 IDPs, no regional elections, and incomplete disarmament. In May the TPLF dumped the federal-backed interim under Tadesse Werede and restored Debretsion Gebremichael. Mobilization and reported forced

conscription followed. Low-level fighting resumed on 1 August. Abiy was already fighting Fano in Amhara (since 2023) and the Oromo Liberation Army in Oromia.

- **Objectives**. Immediate: take the three airports and cut federal air access into Tigray. Operational: open the Afar corridor and the North Wollo/Weldiya axis with Fano, threatening a road system that leads toward the highland interior. Political: the Alliance charter—remove Abiy, write a transitional charter, claim an "inclusive" successor. Territorial: put Welkait and the southern zone back on the table by force. Diplomatic: wreck the Obasanjo track and force any future mediation from a position of initiative.

- **Likely outcome**. TPLF holds Tigray, takes or contests a belt of Afar and Amhara border woredas, then the offensive likely stalls. Federal forces maintain the drone and manpower edge. TPLF forces are thinner than in 2020 after Pretoria disarmament. Internal cohesion is weaker: doubting commanders were detained as the offensive opened, including Tadesse Werede; the Tigray police chief defected; Tigray Peace Forces fight with the ENDF. The army claims 272 TPLF fighters killed and 260 wounded in North Wollo on 24 September—unverified, but consistent with a costly first push. The Alliance is a political front, not a national army



Conclusion

The TPLF chose the timing, the first targets, and the political wrapper. Airport seizures plus cross-border attacks plus a public regime-removal alliance are not the signature of a force only holding a line. We assess Mekelle's real theory of victory is coercive: make northern Ethiopia expensive enough that Abiy's coalition cracks, Fano and other Alliance members keep him fixed, and outsiders return to talks on TPLF terms. That theory is likely to fail at the strategic level. Abiy still owns the air, the capital, and most of the state's coercive tools. Tigray is more polarized than in 2020. The Alliance will not march as one. Eritrea moves from alleged finance to visible supply; and whether Addis answers with a contained drone-and-militia campaign or a full re-invasion of Tigray. A failed offensive that leaves Tigray wrecked again is the most probable end-state. A successful march on the federal center is not.



Tal Shiar was founded by Nadeem Iqbal, a national security expert who served over 16 years as an intelligence officer for the Department of Defense from 2006-2022. His career began as a counter-insurgency analyst on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Task Force (2006–2013), followed by 9 years as a military analyst in the Syria Branch (2013–2022). He deployed five times in support of combat operations (3× Afghanistan, 2× Iraq), including two rotations with Special Operations Forces focused on counter-terrorism missions in the CENTCOM theater. Additional roles included rotations to CIA Headquarters as the military analyst for the DNI Middle East Task Force and served as the Syria Country Director for Office of Secretary of Defense Policy (OSDP). He was recognized with Joint Civilian Commendation/Achievement Medals, the NATO Medal(x3), the Secretary of Defense GWOT Medal, DoD Expeditionary Award and the OSD Excellence Award.