



Policy Brief No. 36

Matyas Rehak/Shutterstock

## Strengthening the Peacebuilding Role of Religious Institutions in Ethiopia

By Yirga Abebe Damtie  
April 2025

### Introduction

The practice of peacebuilding often neglects the role of religion and faith-based institutions in conflict zones. This neglect comes at a cost. These institutions invariably are “located in and on all sides of contemporary conflicts.”<sup>1</sup> They also possess some degree of credibility, trust, and moral authority in societies.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, religion has also underpinned and stirred conflict in various settings. Understanding the different ways it can serve both ends—peace and conflict—is crucial to crafting effective policies that would strengthen the role of religious institutions in peacebuilding.

Ethiopia is a profoundly religious, multi-faith state. It is grappling with myriad conflicts, including religious-based violence in different parts of the country. Against this backdrop,

---

**The Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding:** Centering African knowledge and agency is key to building and sustaining peace in Africa. The Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding (SVNP) works with the Wilson Center’s Africa Program to attain the most appropriate, cohesive, and inclusive policy frameworks and approaches for achieving sustainable peace in Africa. Generously sponsored by Carnegie Corporation of New York since its establishment in 2011, the SVNP works to generate African knowledge to inform US and international peacebuilding policies on Africa; help build the next generation of African peacebuilders through its scholarship program; and create a pan-African network of African peacebuilding organizations, practitioners, and experts to collaborate and share knowledge, best practices, and lessons learned on peacebuilding in Africa.

This publication was made possible by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed in this paper are solely the responsibility of the author and do not represent the views of the Wilson Center or Carnegie Corporation of New York. For more information please visit:

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/the-southern-voices-network-for-peacebuilding>

religious institutions possess the necessary agency and resources to foster peace in the country.

## Overview of the challenge: religious institutions and conflict in Ethiopia

Currently, Ethiopia is wracked by an ongoing armed conflict in the Amhara and Oromia regions, while in the Tigray region, a fragile peace is narrowly holding after a devastating two-year (November 2020-November 2022) war. There are also sporadic eruptions of violence, with varying causes and origins, across the country. Ethiopia is a highly strategic state in the wider region. Instability and insecurity within its borders can have consequences throughout the Horn of Africa.

Religious institutions have a profound impact on Ethiopian society. They have, however, complex linkages with conflict across the country, as has been evident in religious-based violence in various parts of the country, including Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, Gondar, Motta, and Shashemene as well as Silt'e Zone.<sup>3</sup> According to the Ethiopian Peace Observatory, there were a total of 43 violent events in Ethiopia involving religious actors in 2021 and 2022 and 13 in February 2023 alone.<sup>4</sup> In specific contexts, religious-based violence is interconnected and sequential, where violence in one place has led to similar incidents elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

Religious-based tensions arise from the complex interactions between religion and the state, as well as contestations among different religious groups and intra-religious disputes, such as the violence that followed the attempt to establish a separate "Holy Synod of Oromia, Nations and Nationalities" by breakaway bishops of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in February 2023.

Religious actors have also been used for mobilization in political conflicts. One such case is the war in Northern Ethiopia, where religious actors played a key role in (de-)legitimizing the aims and actions of the conflicting parties. This has resulted in an emerging rift within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church between its leadership based in Addis Ababa and religious actors in the Tigray region.<sup>6</sup>

The role of religious institutions in conflict in Ethiopia goes beyond being a driver and mobilizer. In various parts of the country, there have been several attacks against religious institutions and members, which, in turn, served as a trigger for the outbreaks of religious-based violence in a country that has a long history of peaceful coexistence of faiths.

## Religious institutions as peacebuilders in Ethiopia

More often than not, however, religious entities in Ethiopia have played a vital role in reducing conflict and contributing to peacebuilding efforts. In low-intensity and localized conflicts, religious bodies frequently act as mediators. The peacebuilding role of religious institutions also extends to wartime. This author examined one recent case in detail: the



Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Woldiya, Lalibela, and Sekota towns during the Tigray War (2020-2022) in Northern Ethiopia. In this context, the church played numerous roles, including humanitarian, mediating, financial, governance, and psychosocial, in an attempt to support communities impacted by the war.

In particular, the church was able to collect and distribute humanitarian assistance to impoverished sections of society, provide loans to local populations, and maintain certain public services during the war. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church was also able to offer psychosocial support to people traumatized by the war. Notably, it undertook its peacebuilding roles in areas that were largely inaccessible to other organizations that might otherwise have provided similar forms of assistance.

These practices demonstrate the potential for religious institutions to serve as peacebuilders in Ethiopia, complementing the work of secular structures. Yet their efforts have largely gone unnoticed by international and national actors: the National Dialogue Commission faced severe criticism from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church for its exclusion from the Commission's work.<sup>7</sup>

## Policy Options and Recommendations

Given the demonstrable impact of religious institutions on peacebuilding, particularly amid armed conflicts where other actors are unable to play active roles safely and effectively, this policy brief offers the following recommendations for strengthening peacebuilding in Ethiopia.

### To the Ethiopian Government:

**a. Design peacebuilding policies centered on religion and peace.** Given the context in Ethiopia, the government should initiate and implement peacebuilding policies that focus on religion and peace. A new policy should acknowledge the public role of religious actors, champion the coexistence and collaboration of different faiths, and establish a framework that outlines the powers and responsibilities of secular and religious actors in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

**b. Include religious institutions in peacebuilding initiatives in Ethiopia.** Initiatives such as transitional justice, national dialogues, and recovery programs in conflict-affected communities, which are crucial to restoring stability and peace in the country, should incorporate the concerns of religious institutions. Although some of these initiatives pledge to involve religious actors, they must be given a formal and meaningful role in implementation. This would also help to address religious-based tensions in the country.

**c. Cooperate meaningfully with religious institutions.** Although the Ethiopian government's Ministry of Peace is mandated to work with religious organizations in its effort to ensure peace and mutual coexistence, there should be strong functional



cooperation between religious actors and the government. To this end, regular consultation meetings should be established between the two entities at all levels of government.

**To the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) and Civil Society Organizations:**

**a. Organize regular inter- and intra-religious dialogues:** The IRCE has been a forum for interfaith dialogue in Ethiopia since its founding in 2010. However, it does not function independently, and many of its forums are occasional. Accordingly, the IRCE should organize regular dialogues between different religious groups at all levels to foster mutual understanding and resolve emerging disputes among them. Civil society should also engage in facilitating such dialogues.

**b. Provide training to religious actors.** To build the capacity of religious actors in peacebuilding, the IRCE, and CSOs should organize and provide training to religious actors at all levels on peaceful coexistence, mediation, conflict resolution, and other aspects of peacebuilding. In due course, they should develop context-driven training manuals on religion and peacebuilding in Ethiopia.

**c. Support faith for peace advocacy.** Both the IRCE and CSOs should enhance their advocacy role and push for inter-religious peace and the inclusion of religious actors in national peacebuilding.

**To the United States and other international actors:**

**a. Consider religious institutions and their long-established structures as entry points** for peacebuilding by integrating religious peacebuilding into existing diplomatic frameworks, such as the U.S. Office of International Religious Freedom, by developing Ethiopia-specific strategies that formally recognize religious institutions as key partners in peacebuilding.

**b. Include religious institutions and faith-based peacebuilding initiatives in program interventions** designed to support peace and recovery in conflict-affected communities in Ethiopia. Create multi-stakeholder dialogue platforms that bring together religious institutions, government representatives, and civil society to develop collaborative approaches to conflict resolution.

**c. Support inter-faith dialogues** and the empowerment of religious actors in their peacebuilding roles in Ethiopia by providing technical assistance and capacity-building to enhance the conflict-resolution skills of religious leaders. A two-year war between the federal government and the TPLF that saw religious actors in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church being mobilized, some even marching to the battlefield. Indeed, in a statement in July 2023, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Holy Synod issued an apology for its failure to advocate an end to the war and deliver humanitarian aid to the people of Tigray.

---

[1]: Lederach, J. P. (1993). *Pacifism in Contemporary Conflict: A Christian Perspective*. In United States



Institute of Peace symposium on Religious Perspectives on Pacifism, Washington DC. Vol. 28.

[2]: Sampson, C. (2007). *Religion and peacebuilding*. In Zartman, W.I. (ed.). *Peacemaking in international conflict: Methods and techniques*. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace. 273-323.

[3]: Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia. (2022). *The Role of Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia in Peace-Building Process in Ethiopia: Opportunities and Challenges*. A National Level Assessment Final Report. <https://ircethiopia.et/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/FINAL-RESEARCH-REPORT.pdf>

[4]: Ethiopia Peace Observatory. March 08, 2023. *Religious Disputes and Government Involvement in Ethiopia: Monthly Report*. <https://epo.acleddata.com/2023/03/08/epo-february-2023-monthly-religious-disputes-and-government-involvement-in-ethiopia/>

[5]: Ethiopia Observer. April 30, 2022. "A wave of religious violence sweeps following the attack in Gondar." <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2022/04/30/a-wave-of-religious-violence-sweeps-following-the-attack-in-gondar/>

[6]: Schipani, A. August 28, 2023. " 'God wants us away from our enemies': bitter legacy of war splits Ethiopian church." *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/e57c58c7-9ebb-4683-822b-4c35543ad11f>

[7]: Addis Standard. June 6, 2024. "Holy Synod Criticizes National Dialogue Commission for exclusion, calls for Church's 'formal' participation." <https://addisstandard.com/holy-synod-criticizes-national-dialogue-commission-for-exclusion-calls-for-churchs-formal-participation/?amp=1>

**Yirga Abebe Damtie** is a PhD candidate at the Institute for Peace and Security Studies of Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. He has more than 13 years of experience in teaching and research at three public universities in Ethiopia: Jigjiga University, Wollo University, and Addis Ababa University. Previously, Yirga was a research fellow at the Global and European Studies Institute, Leipzig University, and a Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding scholar for the fall 2024 term at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He was also a researcher at the African Peace and Security Program of the Institute for Peace and Security Studies.





# The Africa Program

The Africa Program works to address the most critical issues facing Africa and US-Africa relations, build mutually beneficial US-Africa relations, and enhance knowledge and understanding about Africa in the United States.

The Program achieves its mission through in-depth research and analyses, including our blog Africa Up Close, public discussion, working groups, and briefings that bring together policymakers, practitioners, and subject matter experts to analyze and offer practical options for tackling key challenges in Africa and in US-Africa relations.

The Africa Program focuses on four core issues:

- i. Good governance and leadership
- ii. Conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and security
- iii. Trade, investment, and sustainable development
- iv. Africa's evolving role in the global arena

The Program maintains a cross-cutting focus on the roles of women, youth, and technology, which are critical to Africa's future: to supporting good governance, to securing peace, to mitigating poverty, and to assuring sustainable development.

## SVNP Policy Brief and Research Paper Series

For the full series of SVNP Research Papers and Policy Briefs, please see our website at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/the-southern-voices-network-for-peacebuilding>.



© 2025, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars  
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20004-3027

## The Wilson Center

- [www.wilsoncenter.org](http://www.wilsoncenter.org)
- [wwics@wilsoncenter.org](mailto:wwics@wilsoncenter.org)
- [facebook.com/woodrowwilsoncenter](https://facebook.com/woodrowwilsoncenter)
- [@thewilsoncenter](https://twitter.com/thewilsoncenter)
- 202.691.4000

## The Africa Program

- [www.wilsoncenter.org/africa](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/africa)
- [africa@wilsoncenter.org](mailto:africa@wilsoncenter.org)
- [facebook.com/africaprogram](https://facebook.com/africaprogram)
- [@AfricaUpClose](https://twitter.com/AfricaUpClose)
- 202.691.4118

