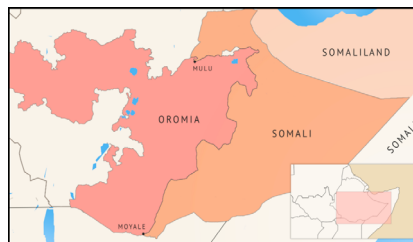


## WHAT DOES UNREST IN OROMIA SIGNIFY?

By Dr. Stephanie M. Burchard

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A map of Ethiopia's Oromia and Somali regions. (Source: Salem Solomon, "What's Driving Clashes Between Ethiopia's Somali, Oromia Regions?" VOA News, September 29, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/lyan5my9y>.)

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Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman speaks at a meeting of the Islamic Military Counterterrorism Alliance in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Sunday, Nov. 26, 2017. Saudi Arabia's crown prince on Sunday opened the first high-level meeting of a kingdom-led alliance of Muslim nations against terrorism, vowing that extremists will no longer "tarnish our beautiful religion." (Source: Saudi Press Agency via AP.)

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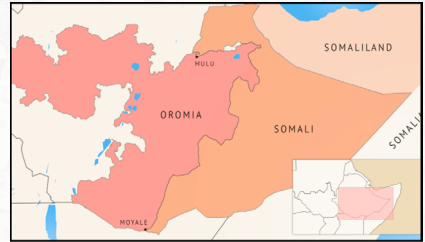
IDA's three federally-funded research and development centers provide objective analyses of national security issues and related national challenges, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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## Origins of Unrest

Despite commonalities in language, religion, and culture, Oromo and ethnic Somalis have experienced intermittent conflict for at least the past 25 years. Their two regional states, Oromia and Somali, share a border that is poorly demarcated. Much of the conflict between the Oromo and Somali groups has historically [centered](#) on access to resources and land.

Both ethnic groups complain about being marginalized by the Ethiopian government, which has been dominated by the Tigray ethnic group. Ethiopia is ethnically heterogeneous, with more than 80 recognized ethnic groups. The Tigray are one of Ethiopia's smaller ethnic groups, representing about 6 percent of the total population. The members of the country's largest ethnic group, the Oromo, which comprises an estimated 35 percent to 40 percent of the population, feel particularly [underrepresented](#) by the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front.

Although tensions between the Oromo and ethnic Somalis are long-standing, the most recent conflict needs to be contextualized against the backdrop of previous unrest in Oromia that began in 2014. After the announcement of a [development scheme in 2014](#) (detailed in the August 25, 2016, issue of *Africa Watch*) that would have enabled the government to incorporate parts of Oromia into the capital city, Addis Ababa, protests broke out across Oromia. During the initial phases of the project, Oromo leaders [accused](#) the government of taking over land and forcibly evicting families. Protests continued and the grievances [expanded](#) to include concerns over human rights abuses, political representation, and limitations placed on freedom of expression. The government ultimately abandoned its expansion plan in January 2016 in response to the unrest, but anti-government protests continued to [spread](#) to the [Amhara](#) community, Ethiopia's second largest ethnic group, and the [capital](#). The government imposed a state of emergency in October 2016.

## Current Conflict

Details are sparse about the most recent clashes, but reports indicate that members from the Oromo ethnic group were killed [first](#), which then triggered reprisal killings of ethnic Somalis. The [clashes](#) are alleged to [involve](#) the Somali Special Police, the Liyu. The [Liyu](#) are a paramilitary group created by the government in the mid-2000s to deal with a previous secessionist group located in the Somali region, the Ogaden National Liberation Front. The Liyu have been accused of using excessive force and engaging in [extrajudicial](#) killings. Coincidentally, in October, government forces were accused of killing four people in Oromia who were [protesting](#) the delivery of a shipment of arms to the Liyu. While some are attempting to define the recent clashes as primarily ethnic in nature, activists in Oromia [claim](#) that the involvement of the Liyu indicates that it is actually state-sponsored violence.

The December 2017 clashes appear to be part of an escalation of violence and protest in the region. From October 1 to November 30, around 118 violent events took place in Oromia, almost 50 percent of which were protests. An estimated 200 fatalities occurred and tens of thousands are believed to have been displaced. This increase in violence follows a lull from April to July. Roughly 30 percent of all conflict activity in 2017 has involved the Liyu in some capacity; almost 50 percent has involved state security forces (military or police).

### Government Response to Unrest

The Ethiopian government responded to the 2014 Oromia security situation with a heavy hand. Ethiopian police were responsible for [hundreds of deaths](#) during protests from 2014 to 2016. In 2016, at the height of the conflict, more than 1,000 fatalities were reported in Oromia. The government arrested protesters *en masse* and attempted to control the flow of information into and out of Oromia. During the state of emergency, at least [29,000](#) persons were arrested, many of whom are still awaiting trial. The government arrested scores of journalists and frequently [jammed](#) nonstate news sources to prevent them from broadcasting. According to Human Rights Watch, the government also routinely [cut cell phone service](#) in areas where the military was deployed, presumably to prevent information about the military's actions from being publicized widely.

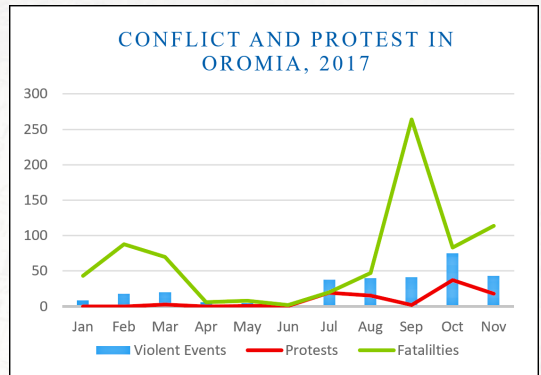
### Conclusion

The Ethiopian government announced in August 2017 that it was lifting the state of emergency due to an [improved security](#) situation, but recent events suggest a resurgence of violence and protest in Oromia. The uptick in violence may signal the beginning of renewed unrest in Ethiopia. This should serve as a reminder that the core issues underlying the previous unrest, namely state repression and political representation, were never adequately addressed.

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Data taken from the Africa Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED): <https://www.acleddata.com/data/realtime-data>.

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## Economic Interests

With a rapidly growing population and insufficient land suitable for agricultural cultivation, Saudi Arabia has been [heavily dependent](#) on food imports. To reduce this dependency, it has identified foreign agricultural production as an important pillar of its food strategy, negotiating deals abroad that [ensure](#) that a significant portion of the food produced will be exported to the Kingdom. With massive amounts of uncultivated yet fertile land, Africa is a prime target for Saudi investment in agriculture sectors, and [Ethiopia, Sudan, and Zambia](#) have been major recipients of Saudi foreign direct investment since [2009](#). By [2016](#), Saudi Arabia was the fifth largest foreign investor in Africa, with \$3.8 billion in capital investments.

In 2016, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in his role as president of the Council of Economic Affairs and Development, presented [Vision 2030](#), Saudi Arabia's road map toward economic diversification for a non-oil future. As part of this plan, the government's sovereign wealth fund, called the [Public Investment Fund \(PIF\)](#), will be an important vehicle through which the Kingdom will secure long-term returns through global investments in non-oil sectors. Emerging markets such as Africa's, where rising [entrepreneurship](#) and a growing middle class offer plenty of opportunities for economic reward, have been identified as a target for PIF investment.

## Countering Iranian Influence

Until 2014, Iran was unopposed as the favored Islamic partner of most African countries. Sudan and Iran enjoyed a particularly close relationship until the Sudanese government expelled Iranian officials, whom they accused of spreading Shiite Islam throughout Sudan's Sunni institutions. Recognizing the opportunity to supplant Iran as Sudan's Islamic partner of choice, Saudi Arabia began to cultivate this relationship, continuing to invest heavily in the Sudanese agriculture sector and funding Islamic projects. In 2015, when Sudan sent [6,000](#) troops to the Saudi-led campaign against the al-Houthi militia in Yemen, Saudi Arabia deposited [\\$1 billion](#) in Sudan's Central Bank. In May 2017, Saudi Arabia raised some eyebrows when it invited Sudanese [President Omar al-Bashir](#), who has been indicted by the International Criminal Court, to participate in a summit meeting that included President Trump.

The year 2016 was pivotal in the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran for influence in Africa. On January 2, Iranian protesters [set fire](#) to the Saudi embassy in Tehran, prompting Saudi Arabia to sever diplomatic relations with Iran. Under pressure from the Kingdom to do the same, Djibouti and Somalia, which had been longtime allies of Iran, followed suit.

The Gulf crisis during the summer of 2017 offered another opportunity for the Kingdom to lobby support from African states and test the loyalty of existing partners. When Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt announced a [diplomatic break](#) with Qatar, which they characterized as supporting terrorist groups and being too close to their regional nemesis, Iran, they concurrently called on African countries to express solidarity with their position. Senegal, Chad, Mauritania, Niger, and Eritrea [obliged](#), while Somalia, which has strong ties with Qatar, remained neutral.

## Security

Saudi Arabia's involvement in African security is a relatively new development in the Kingdom's foreign policy. In December 2015, Saudi Arabia announced the formation of an [Islamic military alliance](#) to combat terrorism. Members (half of which are African states) can [request or offer assistance](#) to each other to fight militants through this forum. Although this forum has been considered by [some](#) to be as much a vehicle for containing Shia Islam as for containing violent extremism, the United States has [welcomed](#) its creation and applauded the Kingdom for taking a more proactive role in counterterrorism. In another example of its commitment to campaigns against extremists, Saudi Arabia pledged [\\$100 million](#) to the G5-Sahel Force in December 2017. The G5-Sahel Force, which involves Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania, has the mission of fighting armed extremist groups and transnational crime across the Sahel. Saudi Arabia's financial pledge to this force is a noteworthy expansion of its military support to countries beyond East Africa or troop contributors to its combat operations in Yemen.

Early in 2016, Saudi Arabia provided [\\$22 billion](#) to help finance Morocco's military industry. Soon thereafter, it diverted [\\$5 billion](#) from Lebanon to the army of Sudan. Given that Morocco and Sudan had contributed troops to the Saudi-led campaign against Houthi rebels in Yemen (along with Senegal), it seems logical to assume that the financial support was a reward for their contributions. In March 2016, following Djibouti's severing of diplomatic relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia [announced](#) that it would establish a military base in the tiny East African country. Situated on the Bab Al Mandeb Strait, Djibouti is a strategic location not only for its proximity to the Suez Canal but also for [monitoring](#) Iranian activity in the region.

## Conclusion

Saudi Arabia seems to be crafting a comprehensive strategy in Africa. It is addressing its own food-security challenges through increased investment in Africa's agricultural sector, while seeking opportunities to diversify its oil-dependent economy through investments in Africa's rapidly growing emerging markets. It continues to compete with Iran through diplomatic and political engagement. Although Crown Prince Mohammed has presented himself as a champion of moderate Islam, the Kingdom's use of "soft power tools," particularly through the construction of Quranic schools and other public goods, is a method of advancing Sunnism as the dominant form of Islam on the continent. In return for contributions of troops to its coalition in Yemen, Saudi Arabia has provided African states with billions in military assistance. Supporting multinational counterterrorism alliances is another means of advancing its influence. In summary, Saudi Arabia's activities in Africa, to date, seem to have been fruitful in achieving its objectives.

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