

**IPSS**

Institute for Peace
& Security Studies
Addis Ababa University

IPSS Briefing Session Concept Note | The Stability Paradox: Contradictory Aspirations and Violence in Post-2018 Ethiopia | 30 September 2026 | 09:30 – 11:30 AM EAT | IPSS conference Hall

I. Rationale/ Background

Political stability is often assumed to be one of the foundational goals of governance, a shared interest uniting the state that rules and the society it governs. Yet, across many fragile and deeply divided states, a bewildering pattern emerges: the very actors who most loudly demand stability are often the ones who work hardest to sabotage it. This research deals with this profound contradiction, exploring why states and non-state actors seem locked in a self-defeating cycle, co-producing the very instability they publicly condemn.

The qualitative research addresses a central puzzle defined by two interconnected paradoxes. First, the societal paradox states that citizens and ethnic communities require a degree of state capacity to exist and function. However, these same actors actively or indirectly work to hollow out state capacity and resist its reach. Second, the state paradox dictates that a central government often needs to empower non-state actors—local militias, regional paramilitaries and ethnic communities—as proxies to enforce order and project its authority into territories it cannot otherwise control. But the state shortly changes gear to launch aggressive campaigns to weaken the exact partners it relied upon to fulfill its critical missions. This dynamic gives rise to a primary research question driving this study: Why do state and non-state actors engage in these contradictory behaviors that systematically undermine their stated, mutual goal of political stability?

To answer this question, the study uses post-2018 Ethiopia as its illustrative case study. In recent years, Ethiopia has exhibited these paradoxes, witnessing large-scale violence between the federal state and powerful regional actors. On one hand, citizens, ethnic communities and nationalist groups have consistently accused the federal government of failing to enforce the rule of law and have decried it for exposing them to profound security challenges. At the same time, some of these very groups have actively worked to dismantle the state's coercive capacity, ambushing its soldiers, disrupting its administration, and making it impossible to enforce stability. Likewise, the federal state has relied on regional militias, paramilitaries and wider communities to stabilize the country against its opponents. But it has also taken drastic measures to undermine these same forces and keep them at bay. Both sets of inconsistency—within state and society—have given rise to or perpetuated high scale political violence.

What explains these contradictory aspirations? The central hypothesis of this research is that the pursuit of stability becomes contradictory and ultimately contributes to violence because actors' goals are inherently shaped by contradictory urges for survival and power, which are, in turn, deeply shaped by conflicting historical memories and political cultures. I will try to show that the paradoxes are not a sign of irrationality but outcomes of a rational, albeit tragic, exercise of will by actors with ambivalent assumptions shaped by past memories.

The significance of this research is threefold. Theoretically, it moves beyond a simple "state vs. non-state" dichotomy to show how these actors are locked in a symbiotic yet destructive relationship, offering a novel



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framework for understanding state fragility. Empirically, it will provide a fresh analysis of the Ethiopian case, focusing on one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary conflict. Finally, from a policy perspective, it underscores that standard interventions such as constructing “effective state institutions,” facilitating “rebel-state negotiations,” or “empowering independent and critical voices in society” must be fundamentally rethought in light of historically embedded and deeply held assumptions about state-society relations.

With this background, the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) at Addis Ababa University is organising a briefing session featuring the author of the research, Dr Semir Yusuf. The event will provide a platform for presenting the study's key findings, recommendations, and their implications for policy and practice.

II. Objective

The main objective of this session is to present and discuss the key findings of the above research and to provide a platform for constructive dialogue among researchers, policy makers, and practitioners regarding state-society relations and conflict dynamics in Ethiopia.

III. Expected Outcomes

- Provide a fresh, focused analysis of the Ethiopian case regarding contemporary political violence.
- Enhanced awareness and shared understanding among stakeholders regarding the societal and state paradoxes that contribute to political stability.
- Context-sensitive insights to guide future conflict resolution, governance, and peacebuilding strategies in Ethiopia and beyond.

IV. Format

The Briefing Session will be led by Dr Semir Yusuf, ARUA 2026 Fellow at the Institute for Peace and Security Studies. The session will be highly interactive, beginning with a presentation by Dr Yusuf, followed by critical reflections from expert discussants who will offer complementary perspectives and engage with the research's methodology, findings, and broader significance. The briefing will conclude with a moderated Q&A session, providing participants with an opportunity to engage directly with the presenter and discussants, exchange ideas, and explore the practical and policy relevance of the research in greater depth. The discussions will strictly follow **Chatham House Rule**.

V. Target audience

- Peace and Security Policy Analysts,
- Academic Researchers,
- Peacebuilding Practitioners,
- Think-tank representatives,
- Diplomatic Community based in Addis

VI. Date and Venue

The session will take place on Wednesday 30 September 2026 from 09:30 - 11:30 AM EAT at the New Conference Hall, IPSS.