

ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



A STUDY OF THE PRACTICE OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AT AMERICAN
CORNERS IN ETHIOPIA AMID DIPLOMATIC TENSIONS DURING THE
NORTHERN CONFLICT

BY

YOHANNES GEZAHEGN

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
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COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

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DATE

INTERNAL EXAMINER

EXTERNAL EXAMINER

Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this thesis is my original work and has not been submitted, either in part or in full, for the award of a degree at any other university or institution. All sources of information and materials used in the preparation of this thesis have been properly cited and duly acknowledged.

Yohannes Gezahegn

Signature _____ Date _____

This thesis is submitted for examination with my approval as an advisor of the candidate.

Demeke Achiso (PhD)

Signature _____ Date _____

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TABLE OF CONTENTS	i
LIST OF FIGURES.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES	v
ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vii
ABSTRACT	viii
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1. Background of the study.....	1
1.2. Statement of the Problem	6
1.3. Central Argument	8
1.4. Objectives of the Study	9
1.4.1. General Objective	9
1.4.2. Specific Objectives of the Study.....	9
1.5. Research Questions	10
1.6. Research Methodology.....	10
1.6.1. Research Approach and Design.....	10
1.6.2. Data Sources and Instruments of Data Collection.....	11
1.6.3. Sampling Technique and Sample Size	12
1.6.4. Method of Data Analysis	13
1.7. Ethical Considerations.....	13
1.8. Significance of the Study	14
1.9. Scope of the Study.....	14
1.10. Limitations of the Study.....	14
1.11. Organization of the Study.....	15
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW	16
2.1. Introduction	16
2.2. Theoretical Review	16
2.2.1. Introduction to theories of International Relations (IR)	16
2.2.2. Realism	17
2.2.3. Liberalism	17

2.2.4. Soft Power	18
2.2.5. Limitations of Soft Power.....	21
2.2.6. American Spaces as Instruments of Soft Power	23
2.3. Conceptual Reviews	23
2.3.1. Definition of Diplomacy.....	24
2.3.2. Agents of Diplomacy	25
2.3.3. Evolution of Diplomacy	26
2.4. Three Schools of Diplomatic Thought	27
2.4.1. Traditional Diplomacy and Public Diplomacy	27
2.4.2. Types of Diplomacy	28
2.4.3. Transition to New Diplomacy.....	29
2.4.4. The Role of Diplomats under New Diplomacy	29
2.4.5. Defining Public Diplomacy	30
2.4.6. The Northern Conflict, Superpowers and Ethiopia	33
2.4.7. The Northern Conflict & the U.S. -Ethiopia Diplomatic Relations	34
2.5. Empirical Review	36
2.5.1. U.S. Public Diplomacy Goals in Africa.....	36
2.5.2. Ethiopia and the Northern Conflict.....	37
2.5.3. American Spaces	38
2.5.4. Strategic Importance of American Spaces.....	39
2.5.5. American Spaces Worldwide	42
2.5.6. American Corners in Ethiopia	42
2.6. Synthesis and Research Gaps	44
CHAPTER 3. MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH	46
3.1. Impact of the Northern Conflict on American Corners' Operations.....	46
3.1.1. Impact on Programming	46
3.1.2. No Internet	47
3.1.3. Closure	48
3.1.4. Corner Staff Impacted.....	49
3.1.5. Corner Relocation	50
3.1.6. Ordered Departure	51
3.2. Strategies for Sustaining Public Diplomacy during the Conflict	52

3.2.1. Preparedness	52
3.2.2. Shifts in Practices	52
3.2.3. Technology	53
3.2.4. New Courses	55
3.2.5. Reduced Visibility	56
3.2.6. Avoidance	56
3.2.7. Promotions Suspended.....	57
3.2.8. Awareness Creation	58
3.3. Influence of U.S. hard power on soft power initiatives at American Corners	59
3.3.1. Change of Narratives against the U.S.....	59
3.3.2. Suspicion.....	60
3.4. Resilience and positive perception of American Corners amid conflict	62
3.4.1. Absence of Physical Threats.....	62
3.4.2. Recognition of Non-Political Role	62
3.4.3. Positive Diplomatic Symbolism	64
CHAPTER 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF MAJOR FINDINGS	66
4.1. Impact of the Northern Conflict on American Corners' Operations.....	66
4.2. Strategies for Sustaining Public Diplomacy during the Conflict	68
4.3. Influence of U.S. Hard Power on Soft Power Practices at American Corners.....	69
4.4. Resilience and Positive Perception of American Corners Amid Conflict.....	70
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	71
5.1. Conclusion.....	71
5.2. Implications for Policy and Research.....	72
5.3. Specific Recommendations	73
REFERENCES	75
APPENDICES	81

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 2. 1: American Spaces in Ethiopia	41

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: List of study participants	12
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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AGOA	African Growth and Opportunity Act
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COVID	Coronavirus Disease
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defense Force
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
IR	International Relation
IVLP	International Visitor Leadership
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NALA	National Archives and Library Agency
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
PD	Public Diplomacy
RT	Russia Today
SALT	Strategic Arms Limitation Talks
SMS	Short Message Service
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TPLF	Tigray Peoples Liberation Front
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USA	United States of America
USACPD	United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy
VOA	Voice of America
WWII	World War Two

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ABSTRACT

This study examined American Corners in Ethiopia as public diplomacy platforms during the northern conflict (2020–2022), a period of conflict and strained U.S.–Ethiopia relations. It explored the impact of the conflict on American Corner operations, strategies used to sustain programming, and the role of U.S. hard power in shaping soft power practices. Using qualitative design, the research drew on unstructured interviews with Corner coordinators, staff and supervisors. Thematic analysis revealed disruptions, particularly in Tigray where the Mekelle Corner was forced to shut down, while others adapted through digital tools and revised programming. Regardless of some hostile attitudes towards the U.S. over its perceived handling of the crisis, the American Corners in the country retained their credibility due to their non-political, community-focused identity. There were no reports of whether physical or any other forms of attack against staff or facilities run by the Embassy. The study concluded that American Corners remained neutral, accessible spaces and vital instruments of U.S. public diplomacy under crisis, recommending continued support for such platforms in fragile contexts.

Keywords: Northern Conflict, United States, Public Diplomacy, American Corners

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the study

Nations are encouraged to adopt partnerships considering various limitations the world is facing today (Kwok, 2017). In facilitating partnerships, Public Diplomacy (PD) positions itself as a vital instrument. It bridges differences in cultures, artistic expressions, narratives as well as connecting people across borders. The approach used by the conventional diplomacy has its primary focus on official government to government correspondence, while PD focuses on direct engagement with citizens of other nations. Such PD activities help in building trust and facilitating understanding among citizens of different countries. The approach aims at addressing limitations of traditional diplomacy by making use of culture as a means of communication.

As Banks (2011) noted, activities such as educational programs, cultural exchanges and similar others are key instruments in the practice of PD. Such approaches contribute in shaping public opinion and perceptions while at the same time advancing positive connections with a country's values and policies. Programs such as cultural festivals provide participants with a great deal of experiences about foreign cultures, laying the foundation for continued partnerships. With such contributions and initiatives, PD goes far beyond the divides in the political sphere. It helps promote grassroots connections and contributes to the overall congruence at the global level.

There are many ways that interconnect culture, security and conflict, according to Gebremeskel et al. (2021). Growing evidence showed that art and cultural expressions can play across the conflict spectrum. Culture is a domain through which individual persons and the larger community respond to violence and instability. Cultural narratives and artistic practices have been used as tools for early warning. This is possible through the expression of grievances or social tensions through symbolic mediums. Some cultural forms also supported resistance movements during periods of active conflict as coping mechanisms. They provided some psychological relief and a sense of continuity. In post-conflict, art has played a role in therapeutic healing, helping communities process trauma. This has been instrumental in facilitating reconciliation and dialogue across divided groups. Hence, cultural engagements in both peace building and security are highlighted here as very essential.

The United States (U.S.) is a good example in heavily investing in PD activities to strengthen its soft power (Foreign Policy, 2024)¹. The country has successfully shaped preferences globally by prioritizing attraction and persuasion over coercion. By this way, the country strengthened its influence on the world stage (Andersson, 2024). Initiatives such as Peace Corps and international student programs as well as media outlets like the Voice of America (VoA) underscored the country's commitment to engaging with foreign audiences. This strategic emphasis on developing goodwill has allowed the U.S. to cultivate its image in foreign country. The strategy also helped the country establish lasting partnerships that strengthened its global leadership.

There is a big role to play for PD especially with the increasing focus on soft power as a tool for shaping foreign relations. Soft power, coined by Joseph Nye (2004), refers to the ability to attract and persuade others through cultural appeal, values, and policies rather than relying on coercion or force. Nye's idea is also supported by Bilonga (2024), who explained that soft power makes use of cultural appeal, values, and diplomacy to develop goodwill and build lasting connections between and among nations. Contrary to this, hard power relies on military capability or economic leverage. PD contributes immensely in laying the conditions for soft power to flourish. This is because it involves direct engagements with people of other countries with a goal of maintaining mutual understanding and building long-term relationships. Soft power is manifested in cultural diplomacy, deploying cultural assets, including art in order to enhance an international influence for a country. Soft power, particularly through cultural practices, contributes to shaping attitudes and building linkages globally (Kwok, 2017).

Gregory (2014) explained that PD in the 20th century was mainly used by governments to influence foreign publics to shape their policies. This traditional approach heavily focused on communication strategies designed to exercise influence using information campaigns and cultural activities. Governments pursued such approaches to control narratives and devise messages that aligned with their national interests. This way they positioned PD as a key instrument in the broader practice of international relations. However, the 21st century saw significant expansion in the scope of public diplomacy, both in terms of the approaches used and practitioners involved. This century now gave rise to sub-state and non-state actors such as international organizations, multinational corporations, and civil society groups to involve in the

¹ Letters to the Next President: The Resilience of U.S. Soft Power

practice of PD. This is because PD activities are now practiced by such non-state actors besides state or government. This way the practice of PD including cultural practices extends beyond formal diplomatic channels.

PD promotes collaboration in political, economic, and cultural sectors to secure a national interest. It deploys strategic approaches to engage foreign audiences. It focuses on addressing challenges across borders through the strategic engagement and cultural initiatives. It leverages influence and cooperation, and deploys tools for effective communication and engagement. It addresses adversaries through strategic communication while encouraging constructive linkages among nations in promoting mutual understanding. It also leverages cultural diplomacy and strategic outreach in order to maintain stability and collaboration globally (Vellikaya, 2018). Utilizing strategic engagement and cultural initiatives, PD works towards a unified identify, addressing challenges that cross borders and affect nations. It aims to leverage influence and promote cooperation among nations by deploying strategic communication and cultural initiatives. PD also promotes a mutual understanding and linkages among nations. In helping ensure stability and international collaboration, it taps into cultural diplomacy and strategic outreach (Ochilova, 2024).

PD, as Kim (2017) mentioned, targets international audiences or foreign publics rather than the local audiences. Its aim is to impose the soft power of a given state by winning the hearts and minds of citizens of other countries. Among the tools used in the practice of PD include art, education, cultural exchange programs, and international broadcasting. This way it works to create positive perceptions and promote mutual understanding. These initiatives contribute to building long-term relationships with other countries by reinforcing influence on the global stage. PD is no longer limited to building just partnerships through educational and cultural activities but also addressing adversaries through strategic communication. The double strategy emphasizes the role it is playing in shaping international perceptions. This way it also strengthens soft power and advances bilateral and multilateral relations (Vellikaya, 2018).

Particularly during Cold War, PD activities saw increased investment. As Kim (2017) indicated many governments put emphasis on cultural exchanges, education and others as part of their foreign policy strategies. These initiatives contributed in advancing the ideological competition

at the time while enhancing goodwill among foreign publics. Even today, countries continue to depend on these tools to win through difficult situations at the international level with the intention of creating stronger linkages across borders. Therefore, as a dynamic and essential element of soft power, PD helps nations to shape narratives at the highest international arena, also engaging constructively with the international community. It is defined as an important tool for building and leveraging soft power, which shows the role it is playing in shaping global perceptions and fostering influence.

Soft power, characterized by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion, has long been seen as critical to public diplomacy. However, Hocking (2005), cited by Kim (2017), challenges this correlation, arguing that linking public diplomacy too closely with soft power risks oversimplifying its reach. Despite this critique, the interplay between soft power and public diplomacy has undeniably contributed to the latter's theoretical and practical development, making it a pivotal element of modern international relations. PD has evolved as a platform for establishing direct relationships with foreign publics, with the dual objectives of advancing national interests and values while creating opportunities for mutual understanding and collaboration (Sharp, 2005, as cited by Kim, 2017).

As outlined by the U.S. Department of State (2023), American Corners serve as vital tools for implementing objectives of public diplomacy. These spaces are designed to promote mutual understanding and strengthen bilateral relationships through cultural, educational, and informational exchange. As part of the broader American Spaces initiative, American Corners avail public access points to information about the United States. They facilitate opportunities for dialogue and collaboration. More than 650 locations worldwide host American Corners as part of the U.S. soft power efforts, organizing cultural events, English language programs and information on U.S. higher education.

Scholars like Cull (2009) have emphasized the significance of such public diplomacy initiatives due to their role in creating positive perceptions and deepening people-to-people ties in host countries. These spaces serve as important tools to implement PD initiatives of the U.S. government (DoS, 2023). They work towards strengthening bilateral relationships between countries through various cultural, educational, and informational exchanges. As access points

for information about the U.S., these Spaces facilitate opportunities for dialogue and collaboration. In countries like Ethiopia, American Corners play critical roles in advancing U.S. foreign policy goals. They encourage civic engagement, promote democratic values, and build connections between American and Ethiopian communities. Ethiopia presents a unique geographic setting in ensuring stability, and regional cooperation that aligns with the U.S. PD initiatives in the Horn of Africa region (Melissen, 2005).

In regions of strategic importance, such as Ethiopia, the critical role of American Corners in advancing U.S. foreign policy goals cannot be overemphasized. These spaces are instrumental in promoting democratic values, encouraging civic engagement, and building connections between American and Ethiopian communities. Due to its geopolitical significance in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia provides a unique setting where U.S. public diplomacy initiatives align with broader goals of promoting stability, democracy, and regional cooperation (Melissen, 2005). By facilitating cross-cultural understanding, American Corners support efforts to counter misinformation, build trust, and enhance mutual respect.

American PD activities in Ethiopia were believed to be impacted by the war in the northern Ethiopia during the 2020-2022 period. However, more research is needed to learn about the impact of the war on the operations of the American Corners in Ethiopia. The conflict likely triggered disruptions to programming and limited access. These challenges likely created issues related to attaining goals in cultural exchange areas and mutual understanding. A formal study is necessary to avoid such speculations and learn more about the perceived impact of the war. According to Sharp (2005), PD promotes engagements and relationships as its core mission while adapting to the complex and evolving circumstances. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate the practice of public diplomacy at the American Corners in Ethiopia during the period of the deadly conflict, exploring the resilience and adaptability of the Corners in withstanding the challenges posed by the northern conflict. By examining their contributions to cultural exchange, common understanding, and bilateral relations, the research aims to provide important insights into the dynamics of PD in a complex and evolving geopolitical landscape.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Under the context of international relations, PD, which focuses on nurturing the people-to-people connections, contributes immensely in complementing the conventional diplomacy. This usually involves formal government-to-government engagement (Melissen, 2005). It is imperative to entertain PD alongside the traditional diplomacy in order to achieve comprehensive and effective strategies. Conventional diplomacy often relies on hard power mechanisms, such as coercion or the use of force. This can have negative impact on relationships at global level. In contrast, PD, as a form of soft power, provides a constructive and inclusive approach. However, as Cristo (2005) explains, the success of PD depends on the willingness of the receiving party – the host nation - to engage and collaborate in the process.

Despite having a potential for transformation, PD is yet to be fully utilized in developing bilateral relations. This leaves a gap in its linkage with traditional diplomatic approaches. Initiatives like American Spaces which cover American Corners and Information Resource Centers present the hands-on application of public diplomacy. These spaces offer the platforms for cultural exchange, dialogue, and building of connections, offering an environment for shared understanding between countries. Zaharna (2010) emphasizes the role of such spaces as critical in encouraging dialogue, open discussions and fostering mutual interests and a deeper sense of partnership. As Nye (2004) noted, PD encourages connections by helping actors to understand each other's behaviors, values, and interests. Such mutual connections are important in avoiding tensions and creating a foundation for mutual cooperation. Nitoiu and Pasatoiu (2023) mentioned that PD facilitates the mutual creation of linkages through the exchange of information and collaborative activities. This as well fosters common values and interests that strengthen diplomatic ties and relationships.

The establishment of American Corners is an important example of PD in action. The facilities function as cultural and educational hubs in various countries. As extensions of the U.S. government's diplomatic initiatives, these spaces are designed to promote dialogue, cultural exchange, and access to information about the United States. By availing resources such as libraries, cultural programs, English language courses and others, American Corners create a better understanding of American values and its ways of life. This notion aligns with Nye (2004)

assertion that soft power thrives on attraction, as these centers create opportunities for people of other countries to connect with U.S. culture and ideals in a positive and collaborative environment.

In addition, the role of American Corners showcases the broader application of Nye's soft power framework in implementing U.S. foreign policy objectives. As they focus on cultural and educational exchanges, these centers help in shaping the perceptions about the United States as a nation that values openness, inclusivity, and innovation. Programs hosted at American Corners are designed for long-term impacts. They often encourage the development of goodwill and partnerships that go beyond cultural understanding to include economic and political cooperation. In this way, PD, as articulated by Nye, becomes a strategic tool for influencing international affairs while strengthening the position of the United States as a leader in global engagement. Educational and cultural exchanges, such as those facilitated by American Spaces, are important in encouraging soft power strategies. Banks (2011) mentions that these exchanges significantly contribute to building connections hinged on mutual respect and understanding, helping countries to communicate their values more effectively. Despite the significance of PD in maintaining bilateral relations of countries, its specific application through avenues like the American Spaces, particularly in Ethiopia, remains underexplored.

Besides, it is essential to learn and understand the strategies used to maintain the operation of these Spaces in the face of strained diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and the U.S. during the northern conflict. This is because the Spaces remained open and were conducting various PD programs while the war was still ongoing. On top of the raging war in northern Ethiopia, which also affected the nation directly and indirectly, the bilateral relation between Ethiopia and the U.S. almost reached a breaking point. So, despite this near collapse in formal diplomatic front, and the departure of American officers and citizens for security reasons, the U.S. maintained its PD Spaces in Ethiopia, through the American Corners. Therefore, it is imperative to examine and understand the strategies implemented at the time to keep the American Corners open in the face of hostile local environment and strained government to government relationship. The study explores how these Spaces deployed PD programs to complement traditional diplomacy. Also, it aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the practice of PD in modern international relations during the period that saw challenges in the bilateral relationship. By

conducting this study, the researcher also tries to fill a gap in literature, specifically related to the practice of PD at these Spaces during times of conflict.

1.3. Central Argument

The northern conflict was triggered by the well-prepared assailant, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) (Abbink, 2021). Another writer Biset (2023) pointed out a member of the TPLF who publicly attested the TPLF's preemptive attack against federal forces based in Tigray at the Time. Other writers also supported this claim. Pellet (2021) mentioned that the northern conflict was instigated by the Tigrayan forces who attacked military bases ran by the federal forces in a pre-emptive operation. The conflict that followed the attack by the TPLF led to a significant breakdown in diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and many other key international actors. This included foreign governments, international organizations, and other influential entities.

The war resulted in a widespread international condemnation of the Ethiopian federal government for human rights abuses, the blockade of humanitarian aid, starvation, famine, and restricted access to the region. These accusations against the federal government heightened tensions between Ethiopia and countries such as the United States and other entities like the United Nations and the European Union. The United States is the largest provider of humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia. It played a crucial role before, during, and after the northern conflict. The U.S. and other international entities put enormous pressure on the federal government. They used pressure as an approach to cease the hostility. The TPLF, mentioned above as the instigator, was subjected to much less pressure to ceasefire than the federal government.

...they [the West] address, or rather 'target', the Ethiopian government and not the insurgent TPLF which has caused most of the killing and destruction. A subsidiary role is played here by global media discourse toward this conflict, reporting haphazardly on a succession of events, but unconnected to historical lines and context of the state in question. Such reporting— in dominant news producing media like Reuters, AFP and AP as well as global newspapers often uncritically supported the insurgent TPLF, despite its appalling human rights record and its devastating campaigns against civilian populations. This again had an effect on international policymaking towards Ethiopia (Abbink, 2021).

According to Kirubel (2024), the Ethiopian federal government protested against the approach pursued by the U.S. government in dealing with the warring parties. The writer said the approach pursued by the U.S. government at the time was favored by the TPLF. The U.S. applied significant pressure on the Ethiopian federal government, employing measures such as removing Ethiopia from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), terminating security assistance, and imposing travel restrictions on key Ethiopian officials. These actions further deepened the diplomatic rift between Ethiopia and the United States (Blanchard, 2021).

Despite the formal near collapse in diplomatic relations, the U.S. continued its initiatives in public diplomacy, particularly through the American Corners in Ethiopia. This research argues that, contrary to the deteriorating formal ties, the operations of the American Corners remained largely unaffected by the diplomatic fallout and played a vital role in maintaining U.S.-Ethiopian relations through soft diplomacy during the northern conflict. The study highlights the practice of PD initiatives at the American Corners in Ethiopia, and the sustained people to people engagement between the U.S. and Ethiopia, even in times of severe diplomatic tension.

1.4. Objectives of the Study

1.4.1. General Objective

Examining the practice of public diplomacy at the American Corners in Ethiopia during the northern conflict is set as the general objective of this study.

1.4.2. Specific Objectives of the Study

The key research objectives to be investigated include:

1. Investigating the impact, if any, of the northern conflict on the operations of the American Corners in Ethiopia.
2. Exploring any adaptations made by the American Corners in Ethiopia to maintain public diplomacy works during the northern conflict.
3. Examining whether American soft power, practiced through public diplomacy works at the American Corners, was influenced by U.S. hard power policies during the northern conflict.

1.5. Research Questions

The research targets addressing the following research questions:

1. How were the operations of the American Corners in Ethiopia affected by the conflict in northern Ethiopia?
2. What strategies were adopted by the American Corners in Ethiopia to continue public diplomacy works during the northern conflict?
3. How did the hard power policies of the U.S. shape its soft power initiatives practiced through the American Corners in Ethiopia during the northern conflict?

1.6. Research Methodology

This section outlines the research methodology, detailing the research approach and design, sample size and sampling technique, sources of data, instruments for data collection, and methods of data analysis.

1.6.1. Research Approach and Design

Qualitative research approach was employed given the nature of the research objectives and focus areas. Regarding research design, descriptive exploratory design was used. Stuckey (2013) notes that qualitative research is essential for a deep understanding and exploring of participants' lived experiences. It provides a more comprehensive and nuanced description of a phenomenon. Additionally, VanderStoep and Johnston (2009), highlighted that qualitative research provides a unique and compelling interpretation of a text, supported by rich descriptive examples that present the researcher's interpretation. Hence, the qualitative approach used in this study helped explore the topics grounded in the experiences and perspectives of participants.

The research design chosen for this study was a case study. According to VanderStoep and Johnston (2009), case study intends to explore the defining characteristics of a specific context. In some cases, it helps in describing an event or process within a given context. Additionally, Marczyk, DeMatteo, & Festinger (2005) mentioned that case studies require a systematic investigation of one or a small group of entities. Compared to other research methods, this approach involves a higher level of interaction between the researcher and the participant.

Therefore, a case study design is well-suited for this study for a couple of reasons: it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the factors contributing to the continued operation of American Corners in Ethiopia during the northern conflict; it also provided a detailed description of the situation. Using a consistent set of interview guides, interviews were conducted with pertinent individuals and respondents across four different levels to strengthen the thoroughness and accuracy of this research. This approach of employing a four-tiered grouping helped in ensuring the quality of the findings through methodological triangulation.

1.6.2. Data Sources and Instruments of Data Collection

Primary data sources were used for this research. This data collection instrument was aimed at systematically addressing the objectives of the research. Hence, direct semi-structured in-depth interviews were used with the key informants selected for this study. The selected group of informants possessed a strong knowledge about the issue of the research. This data collection tool was chosen in order to capture firsthand insights and lived experiences of the informants who were grouped into four levels. The first was the overall American supervisor while the second was an Ethiopian senior coordinator of all the American Corners in Ethiopia. The third group of informants were unit coordinators of each of the Corners and the fourth and last group of respondents were regular visitors to the Corners. The visitors had their lived experience of the operations of American Corners during the war period. These different groupings helped in cross-referencing data obtained from the key informants who were very familiar with the Corners as well as the functions of the Corners. As Utibe (2020) noted, interview is the chief approach used in qualitative research and it is the most direct, research focused interaction between the interviewer and interviewee.

1.6.3. Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Table 1: List of study participants

Participant Group	Role	Number of Informants
American Officer	Supervisor	1
Senior Local Staff	Overall coordinator	1
Local staff	Unit Coordinators	6
Visitors	Volunteering trainers	10
		18

The sampling technique used was non-probability sampling with focus on purposive sampling. This sampling technique is preferred for choosing participants who were knowledgeable and who could provide a deeper insight into the research topic. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the selected respondents. Overall, as indicated in the table, 18 respondents participated in the study. The respondents were purposely selected based on their direct involvement and familiarity with the operations of the American Corners. The period specifically focused on the duration of the northern conflict. The 10 frequent participants were purposively selected in consultation with the unit coordinators to ensure representation from a broad spectrum of individuals actively engaged in programs during the given period. The selection was aimed at reflecting all the regions where the American Corners are located: Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, Jimma, Bahir Dar and Mekelle. The inclusion of views from all the Corners proved to be strategic in allowing the researcher to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives, ensuring the data was rich and reflective of the experiences and views of both the coordinators, regular attendees and an American Officer across different regional contexts.

The association of the research participants with the U.S. Mission in Addis Ababa may raise some potential concerns regarding the validity of triangulation as the participants shared some form of association with the Mission. But such concerns were mitigated by the fact that the participants represented four different respondent groups. Each group differed from the other based on its roles, responsibilities and the level of engagement or association with the Mission. The participants drew their observation or views from their lived experiences rather than their association with the Embassy. Their viewpoint was also not just about their engagement with the

U.S. mission but a personal and individual experience for which standard ethical principles were used to make their viewpoints confidential. Participants were asked to reflect on their personal capacity and experiences in relation to the research objectives. They were not speaking in official capacity or on behalf of the U.S. Mission. Their different levels of experience added depth and diversity to the dataset.

1.6.4. Method of Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was mentioned by writers as a key method in qualitative research. Braun & Clarke (2006) indicated that thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns within data. It allows researchers to systematically examine recurring themes for a deeper insight into the subject of study at hand. In this study, the process of data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis. As mentioned, this method was preferred for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. The researcher systematically categorized and organized the given data first into concepts, then into sub-themes and finally into major themes. This process involved identifying patterns that are repetitive. In order to explore the relevance and connection to the research objective, each theme and its associated sub-themes were then examined in-depth. The aggregation of the data obtained from the different sources helped the researcher to observe patterns, reduce potential biases, and strengthen the consistency of the conclusions drawn. This approach helped in getting a deeper understanding of PD practices at American Corners during the war that strained the diplomatic relationships between the U.S. and Ethiopia.

1.7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were employed to guide the study which relied on the informed consent and the voluntary participation of the key informants during the data collection process. The key informants were made aware about the purpose of the research in advance. The research participants were told that the data obtained from them would only be used for academic purposes. The researcher briefed in detail about himself, the institution he is from and the objective of the research in order to build trust with the research participants. Hence, the data gathering process started after discussions about the research process and informed consent was secured from the participants. The privacy and anonymity of the informants was also observed throughout the study.

1.8. Significance of the Study

The study in particular focuses on the practice of American soft power diplomacy at the American Corners in Ethiopia. The time frame is limited to the northern conflict. With this focus, the research provides crucial insights into how PD activities can still be implemented in conflict settings. It tried to fill the gap in the literature regarding PD practices in conflict settings through an empirical case study. The findings of this research will inform PD practices in adapting to challenging situations. The findings are also expected to contribute to the broader discussions in international relations and inform strategies to navigate through conflict situations. Besides, the research could inform future diplomatic practices, especially between the United States and Ethiopia with a focus on cultural and educational outreach activities.

1.9. Scope of the Study

This study was focused on exploring the practice of PD specifically at the American Corners in Ethiopia during the northern conflict. It in particular tried to get insights into how these cultural and educational outreach programs contributed to PD activities during the war. The research looked into the strategies implemented, challenges encountered and the activities implemented by the American Corners in sustaining the people-to-people relationship and engagement during the period of the deadly crisis. The scope of the study was limited to the northern conflict from 2020 – 2022. Its geographical focus was limited to Ethiopia, especially to the six locations of the American Corners. This geographical scope means that the findings may not be directly applicable to other contexts or countries. It is believed that the study's focus provides a unique and in-depth analysis of the practice and adaptability of public diplomacy initiatives in areas affected by conflicts.

1.10. Limitations of the Study

The constraints or limitations of this study include the sole focus on in-depth interviews with only primary data sources. Other data collection tools would have further added more dimension to the findings. In Addition, lack of literature on the specific subject of the practice of public diplomacy during conflicts, especially related to the American Corners, was another limitation. These limitations may have affected the comparative analysis of the research and its findings. Additionally, finding participants who actively participated at the American Corners during the

conflict period proved difficult. This was because individuals who had such experience might have moved out of their original locations due to education, work or family related reasons.

The sensitivity of the subject, particularly in relation to the diplomatic relations between the United States and Ethiopia during the northern conflict, also posed a challenge. This might have influenced participants' willingness to share information openly. In addition, biases towards their respective institutions might have affected the perspectives of participants, particularly those directly affiliated with the Embassy. Especially, since the in-depth interviews with regional participants were conducted virtually, the participants might have held back some information due to some sensitivity or fear of perceived retribution. Financial constraints and security concerns hindered the ability to travel in person to all the selected American Corners, limiting the scope of in-person interviews for all.

Despite the challenges and limitations encountered, the researcher used several other strategies to collect information for the study. To overcome the limited literature on the particular subject, the researcher included literature on related themes from different sources. Besides, the researcher used thematic saturation method by continuing the interviews until it reached a point of capturing the full range of perspectives relevant to the research questions. To mitigate the challenge of traveling to all the selected American Corners, the researcher conducted virtual interviews, ensuring that the geographical constraints did not significantly limit the scope of the study.

1.11. Organization of the Study

The research is organized into five chapters. Chapter One covered the overview of the research. This chapter outlined the background of the study, the statement of the problem, the central argument, research objectives and questions. It also included the methodology and methods of data collection, the scope and limitations of the study, the significance of the study, and the organization of the research. Chapter Two covered the literature review part with a focus on the conceptual, empirical and theoretical reviews. Chapter Three discussed major findings of the research and Chapter Four dug deep into the analysis and discussion of the major findings. Finally, Chapter five presented Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

A comprehensive review of literature related to the northern conflict and other themes pertaining to the study was presented in this section. The review of literature was presented in a way that complemented the major objective of the research which was related to the American Corners in Ethiopia. The review covered theoretical perspectives, conceptual reviews, and empirical evidence to provide a well-rounded understanding of the subject. The theoretical review featured some theories of International Relations (IR), soft power and key public diplomacy frameworks and models that informed the practice of PD at the American Corners, the Corners themselves, and their role in fostering people-to-people connections. Major definitions and thematic discussions related to public diplomacy and diplomacy were entertained in the conceptual review part while the empirical evidence looked into existing studies and data on public diplomacy practices, and their effectiveness amid diplomatic challenges. Also, finally, by synthesizing these perspectives, this section identified research gaps and highlighted significant contributions of the study.

2.2. Theoretical Review

2.2.1. Introduction to theories of International Relations (IR)

As noted by Ari and Toprak (2018), the devastation of the First World War (WWI) served as a catalyst for the emergence of International Relations (IR). The scale of destruction and human loss prompted scholars and policymakers to examine more about the causes of war and how to prevent its recurrence. Hence, instead of just relying on philosophical approaches, these scholars in the field, tried to analyze international politics through empirical and systematic approaches. This marked a shift toward a more scientific and policy-oriented study of international affairs. Scholars developed several schools of thoughts regarding the interactions among actors in the world. Theories such as Realism, Liberalism and others laid the bases for understanding such state behaviors and the structure of the international system. Each theory provided different insights and tools in enriching the academic discourse and analysis of the international system. It allowed for different interpretations of events and trends at global level.

2.2.2. Realism

The realist school of thought sees states as the main actors in international relations. It considers the international system as anarchic. For realists, nation state is the principal actor in international relations. Based on this theory, the purpose of governance is survival of the nation in a hostile international environment. It considers the acquisition of power as a proper, rational and inevitable goal of foreign policy of a country. Based on this conceptualization, the international arena is a platform for power grabbing. The theory considers power as a means and an end in itself. It is power that helps nations to survive in a hostile global environment (Ari & Toprak, 2018).

Realists claim that every country is potentially an enemy of every other country. This happens whether by intention or through the inherent threat it poses to others' security and survival. In the absence of an overarching global government, states exist in a permanent condition of anarchy, which harbors a constant risk. This worldview of realist school of thought has a deep historical root in the works of scholars such as Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Thomas Hobbes. These foundational figures significantly shaped the realist school of thought, challenging the idealistic or moralistic views of politics. The writings continue to influence many contemporary policymakers. Yet, states maintain restraint in the use of force. They do not fight all others even when the situation is dominated by realist principles. The states are constrained by geography, national interests, and the balance of power. First published in 1948, Hans J. Morgenthau's classic realism book - *Politics Among Nations* - has long been regarded as one of the foundation stones of International Relations theory and critic against idealism (Schieder & Spindler, 2014),

2.2.3. Liberalism

The classical liberalism dates back to the period of ancient philosophers (Ari & Toprak, 2018). Writers such as John Locke came up with this school of thought in the 17th century. The liberal theory of international relations considers the individual as the unit of analysis. Therefore, states exercised minimal authority, specifically in the areas such as military and law enforcement. The minimal role of states was confined to especially, ensuring public order. But, liberalism in modern periods has become associated with a more active role for the state in economics. This was aimed at redistribution of wealth and power to ensure equity in society. Liberalism in

particular advocates for the protection of the private sector. It criticizes realism for its inadequacy to explain cooperation among states. In their work, Dunne, Kurki, & Smith (2013) mentioned Immanuel Kant who said humans are able to cooperate and construct a more peaceful and harmonious society. The cooperation is pursued despite the individualistic nature of humans. Hence, liberalism usually encourages cooperation because of its focus on human freedom. This is why liberalism school of thought facilitates for international organizations to play important roles in fulfilling the common interests of people.

The critical transformation in world politics over the years comes from the mutual expansion of three important phenomena connected to liberalism and its potentially peace-promoting effects. One is the spread of democracy throughout most of the world. A second is the multiple networks of communications, trade, and finance often summarized as globalization. The third is the multiplication of inter-governmental organizations, especially those composed primarily of democratic governments. Each of these supports and extends the other in a powerful feedback system envisioned by Immanuel Kant (Dunne, Kurki, and Smith, 2013).

2.2.4. Soft Power

Ayhan (2018) notes that the issue of ‘soft power’ was first emerged in the context of American interests by Joseph Nye who defined soft power as a strategy based on attraction rather than coercion. Introduced in 1990, the notion of soft power refers to a country’s ability to influence others and achieve strategic objectives through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or military force. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, this concept was largely understood in the context of the United States, emphasizing its cultural and economic appeal on the global stage (Mokaddem, 2019). As per the tools of soft power, foreign direct investment (FDI), infrastructure development, educational exchange programs and others are among them. The approaches can be different but the key objective is gaining political influence and securing access to natural resources.

Soft power operates under distinct principles. It relies on three key tenets. First it derives from being esteemed, valued, or respected by others. Second, it is rooted in intangible assets, making it a primarily psychological and perceptual force, and third, its effectiveness varies depending on

the state employing it and the specific context in which it is applied (Kelly, 2017). Soft power, as further elaborated by Chitty, Ji, Rawnsley, and Hayden (2017), is a cultural construct that comprises both the resources dedicated to cultivating attraction-based influence and the strategies employed to leverage these resources to advance the interests of various actors. Another research by Bilonga (2024) mentioned that a country is more likely to attract allies and partners when it is seen as a model of good governance, transparency, and inclusivity. However, the projection of political values can also be a double-edged sword. Soft power and credibility can be lost when actions by a country contradict its professed values. For example, criticism of human rights violations or undemocratic practices can undermine a country's ability to project a positive image. This can be seen in cases where the actions of a government are perceived as inconsistent with its advocacy for democracy or freedom (Bilonga, 2024).

Building empathy in international relations is key to gain acceptance and reduce tensions. In building a long-term relationship with foreign audience, approaches to engagement can be adjusted. What is reflected in soft power are the people and institutions that shape a country. It showcases creativity, innovation, and progress (Brown, 2017). For public diplomacy to be effective, it must feel genuine to the target audience. In contemporary diplomacy, soft power has emerged as an important tool providing countries with the ability to influence global perceptions and shape international relations. This is carried out through cultural appeal, political values, and positive engagement. In an increasingly interconnected world, soft power provides a means of building long-lasting relationships and fostering mutual understanding (Bilonga, 2024).

The openness of the U.S. society, governance and free press are all sources of its soft power. Congress and the courts can criticize and correct policies. When government instruments avoid such criticism, they diminish their own credibility, and also fail to capitalize on an important source of attraction for foreign elites. In fact, some observers believe that U.S. civil society, including Hollywood, television, universities and similar others, do more to create soft power than the government. Even the military can sometimes play a role in the generation of soft power. In addition to the aura of power that is generated by its hard-power capabilities, the U.S. military has a broad range of officer exchanges, joint training and assistance programs with other countries in peacetime (Nye, 2018).

When a country's foreign policy is seen as contributing positively to global stability, peace, and development, its policy can significantly affect its soft power. Nations that engage in humanitarian assistance, conflict resolution, and development aid often gain admiration and support from other countries. Soft power is enhanced when foreign policy aligns with the values and principles that resonate with the international community. The perception of foreign policy actions can have a significant impact on a country's soft power. Military interventions, unilateral actions, or policies perceived as self-serving can undermine a nation's image and reduce its attractiveness. Therefore, by communicating a nation's intentions and actions to foreign audiences, effective public diplomacy maintains and enhances soft power (Bilonga, 2024).

Kwok (2017) explained culture as one of the most visible and influential components of soft power. It covers everything from music, film, literature, and cuisine to sports, fashion, and art. A country's cultural output can create a sense of familiarity and admiration, making its values and lifestyle appealing to people in other countries. Cultural diplomacy operates as a manifestation of soft power, utilizing cultural assets, including art, to enhance a nation's global influence. This framework explores the ways in which soft power, particularly through cultural expressions, contributes to shaping perceptions and building relationships in the international arena. Cultural diplomacy serves as the cornerstone of public diplomacy, effectively conveying a nation's self-identity through its cultural expressions. It contributes to national security through nuanced, far-reaching, and enduring impacts. Historically, America's cultural wealth has arguably been as influential as military interventions in establishing its global leadership, including during the war on terror.

Cultural diplomacy has demonstrated the ability to go beyond traditional diplomatic barriers. It has its emphasis on soft power through artistic expressions. It focuses on promoting shared humanity, breaking down stereotypes, and contributing to the construction of narratives that emphasize commonalities rather than differences. Cultural diplomacy can continue to play a vital role in shaping a world where shared values and understanding transcend geopolitical boundaries. It is essential to acknowledge the limitations and drawbacks inherent in cultural diplomacy. From cultural bias to using it as a political instrument, these challenges underscore the need for careful consideration and ethical practices in implementing cultural diplomacy initiatives. It is also crucial for policymakers, cultural diplomats, and stakeholders to address

these challenges, refine strategies, and ensure that cultural diplomacy remains authentic, inclusive, and impactful (Kwok, 2017)

Military might or economic leverage are the key projections for hard power. But soft power draws upon cultural appeal, values, and diplomacy to foster goodwill and build lasting relationships between nations. The role of soft power in diplomacy has become more important than ever in today's globalized and interconnected world. It shapes international perceptions, influences global public opinion, and helps countries advance their interests without resorting to force. Some of the most critical components of soft power include culture, political values, and foreign policy. Each of these elements play a unique role in shaping the perception of a country on the global stage (Bilonga, 2024).

Especially in areas of conflict, soft power, has come alongside traditional hard power, providing new instruments for dealing with the crisis (Lombardi, 2019). The role of soft power is significant in a world where information flows freely and public opinion can significantly influence diplomatic outcomes. Initiatives such as the Fulbright Program in the United States, Confucius Institutes in China, and international broadcasting services like BBC World and RT are examples of public diplomacy efforts aimed at promoting a positive image and building cultural ties (Andersson, 2024). Besides, while the military is often viewed through the lens of force projection, its peacetime roles, focused on collaboration, education, and humanitarian assistance, highlight its potential as a vehicle for soft power. These efforts, when aligned with broader diplomatic strategies, can significantly deepen bilateral ties and bolster a country's influence through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2018).

2.2.5. Limitations of Soft Power

Soft power is increasingly critical to foreign policy strategies. But it is not without its limitations. As Ayhan (2018) notes, the first constraint lies in the overreliance on hard power. This refers to military force or coercive pressure that undermines the credibility and effectiveness of soft power initiatives. When a state simultaneously employs hard power tactics, its attempts at attraction may be perceived as manipulative. Secondly, soft power requires receptive audiences. These are willing interpreters and receivers who voluntarily embrace the values, policies, or cultural offerings being projected. Without such voluntary engagement, soft power loses its

fundamental basis of influence. Thirdly, Ayhan argues that soft power is inherently more applicable in democratic contexts than in autocracies in which public has no stake and decision-making is more centralized in the hands of a single ruler. In such environments, efforts to influence foreign publics are limited by the absence of pluralism and civic participation. Fourth, soft power is generally more influential in achieving specific, targeted goals rather than broad, long-term national objectives. Fifth, the degree of governmental control over the sources of attraction, such as cultural institutions, media, and educational exchanges, plays a critical role in determining how effectively soft power can be leveraged. Finally, Ayhan (2018) notes that the fluctuating nature of public opinion across time and regions introduces skepticism about the consistency and long-term reliability of soft power as a diplomatic tool.

Despite the many advantages it offers in contemporary diplomacy, soft power also presents significant challenges. Among other key difficulties is the intangibility of soft power. Its impact is often difficult to measure and requires a long-term commitment. Hard power can achieve immediate results through force or economic pressure. But soft power relies on shaping perceptions and building relationships over time. This makes it harder to quantify success or failures and can make soft power strategies vulnerable to sudden shifts in global opinion (Bilonga, 2024).

Soft power has inherent limitations that constrain its effectiveness and strategic deployment. This is regardless of its growing prominence in global affairs. One of the primary challenges lies in the nature of its source. Soft power largely emanates from a nation's civil society, its cultural institutions, educational systems, values, and public discourse, instead of from centralized government initiatives. This makes it significantly more difficult for governments to control or direct. Unlike military power, which can be exercised through direct commands, soft power relies on influence, persuasion, and attraction. These tools are less predictable and slower to deliver tangible outcomes. Besides, soft power operates on a longer time horizon while military actions can produce immediate results. The effects of cultural and ideological influences often unfold gradually. In today's political landscape, many populist governments exhibit a growing impatience with soft power strategies, often perceiving them as slow and uncertain. This short-term outlook contributes to declining investment in cultural diplomacy, international broadcasting, and educational exchanges. Thus, the limitations of soft power lie not in its

irrelevance, rather in its complex nature, slower pace, and the challenges of coordination in societies that coexist despite differences in traits. It is a power of attraction rather than coercion. While it may not yield immediate victories, its enduring impact on minds and values remains a great force in international relations (Nye, 2018).

2.2.6. American Spaces as Instruments of Soft Power

Youth around the world continue to engage with well-established cultural institutions like the Instituto Italiano di Cultura, the Alliance Française, and the British Council. But the U.S. government is trying to match that influence through *American Corners*. These are small sections within local libraries or public spaces meant for cultural and informational outreach. These spaces fall short of the comprehensive libraries and cultural hubs the U.S. once maintained during the Cold War. Funding is much limited with inconsistent oversight and programming. U.S. public diplomacy efforts were also significantly constrained by security concerns due to past attacks on U.S. embassies. In response to these threats, U.S. diplomats were largely restricted to secure embassy compounds. These limitations made public access to cultural and informational spaces increasingly difficult. They restricted direct engagement with foreign audiences. Concerns remained that any visible affiliation with the U.S. government could pose security risks, even when such centers were outsourced to private entities and staffed by local personnel. There have been some exceptional cases where some initiatives successfully established publicly accessible cultural centers under controlled conditions (Boduszyński, 2018).

2.3. Conceptual Reviews

This section examined classifications, definitions and other themes on diplomacy, public diplomacy and related concepts, establishing their relevance to the research context. The review offered a foundational understanding of key terms, theories, and frameworks critical to the study at hand. Synthesizing scholarly discourse, this section tried to clarify distinctions between traditional and modern diplomatic practices. The section also looked into gaps and issues needing clarity in conceptualizations, with some highlights on the northern conflict. This set the stage for the empirical discussions that followed. The structured review ensured a clear theoretical grounding for analyzing the role of American Corners in mitigating U.S.-Ethiopia tensions during the northern conflict.

2.3.1. Definition of Diplomacy

Except a few attempts, defining diplomacy has remained a challenge. This is because there is no single, universally accepted definition of the term among scholars. Ancient Greek was responsible for creating the word diplomacy from *diploun*, meaning “twofold” or “double.” Lohmann (2017) mentioned that historically, the term was linked with *diplomas*, special documents carried by religious envoys to ensure safe passage during their travels. Over time, diplomacy has evolved to include various aspects including international relations and negotiation. Diplomacy is one of the oldest and most extensively used methods of establishing and maintaining international cooperation.

In general terms, diplomacy is the management of international relations through negotiation, dialogue, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. States use diplomacy to establish alliances, resolve disputes, strengthen economic relations, and promote cultural and military exchanges (Figus, 2018). These activities are typically carried out by a representative of a country residing abroad. The person engages in discussions that shape international policies. Diplomacy is the key for governing international relations using some form of rules. It is generally linked with the state and its government, serving as a fundamental instrument for both bilateral and multilateral interactions (Meerts, 2015).

The term has also been defined in broader terms. Berridge (2015) emphasized the role of diplomacy as a critical tool for keeping relationships among states. This way states prevented conflicts, and ensured peace and stability in the international system. Similarly, Huihui (2017) defined diplomacy more specifically as the conduct of official relations between the governments of independent states. The practice of diplomacy extends beyond the traditional forms of negotiations. Meerts (2015) argued that diplomacy is an essential instrument of international governance. It covers several functions going beyond just negotiation. Modern diplomacy has evolved to include concepts such as "track two diplomacy." This involved dialogue including between non-governmental actors. This expanded view takes into consideration the growing role of informal and multilateral approaches in conflict resolution and international cooperation. Berridge (2015) further notes that the digital age has reshaped diplomatic practices, introducing new channels of communication and engagement.

Track-two diplomacy consists informal interactions that involve officials working in their individual capacity. They create an opportunity to engage with adversarial states, while also keeping some space for more ideas to float and discuss. There is a big advantage in deploying this approach. It is preferred over public diplomacy conducted by only non-governmental approaches due to its inclusion of participants close to governments on both sides of a hostile relationship. This approach has been utilized with varying degrees of success, for example between the U.S.–China and the U.S.–Iran cases. On the other hand, in critical cases, such as U.S.–North Korea relations, endeavors through track-two diplomacy brought about only limited success. Track-one and track-two diplomacies are supported by governments. But those not supported by governments such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are good channels to maintain contact with hostile foreign publics (Wiseman, 2018).

One of the key functions of diplomacy is negotiation. Such initiatives get revealed when diplomats work to resolve conflicts through agreements between states. Diplomats are negotiators. They pass on messages and carefully handle the delivery of them. While doing this, they consider the context and manner in which the messages are delivered. Reporting is another critical function of diplomats. This reporting involves observing and conveying socio-political and economic conditions from the host state to the home government. Assessments of the roles of political parties and the general situation in the host country were included here. In addition, diplomacy plays an important role in securing the interests of citizens abroad. It ensures their safety and security while creating goodwill. Diplomacy also works to resolve conflicts through negotiation and accommodation (Huihui, 2017)

2.3.2. Agents of Diplomacy

According to Holmes & Rofe (2016), diplomats carry out their work through communication, and negotiation. They are agents or symbolic representatives of their countries. Historically, from ancient civilizations to the present day, diplomats have occupied elite positions in society. They act as formal agents of communication, relaying messages between their home office and the host state's government. Their representation is both legal and political. Since they act on the behalf of their own government, diplomats are required to follow the directives of their home government and foreign policy (Huihui, 2017). Making every effort to promote the interests of

their own countries is the main function of a diplomatic agent or an Ambassador. Besides, the diplomat works to portray a positive image of their country and encourage cooperation (Figus, 2018).

These agents or diplomatic representatives facilitate the state-to-state interactions. They serve as political representatives of their governments and maintain relations and consult with host governments. In contrast, consular officers deal on protecting citizens traveling abroad. They work on enforcing customs and immigration laws. Diplomatic activity is usually carried out in the main capital of a country. This ensures direct communication with the host government and other diplomatic missions (Figus, 2018). This division between diplomatic and consular functions reflects the different faces of diplomacy, which balances political engagement with practical administrative duties.

Diplomatic agents are now categorized into four distinct ranks based on their level of representation and authority. These are: (a) The highest-ranking diplomatic representatives who serve as Ambassadors; (b) Representatives with diplomatic status but rank below ambassadors. These are Envoys and Ministers; (c) Ministers Resident which is rarely used and (d) Chargés d’Affaires, who work in the absence of an ambassador or minister. In practice, ambassadors are generally exchanged only between sovereign states. This reinforces their highest status in diplomatic protocol. It is during normal or peaceful times that countries exchange foreign service agents. One of the first acts of war or problems in the relationship is usually the breaking off of diplomatic relations between the countries involved. This means the representatives in the respective countries are called back or sent home (Figus, 2018).

2.3.3. Evolution of Diplomacy

The evolution of diplomacy can be traced back to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. The period marked the formal emergence of the modern state system. It also laid the foundation for sovereign equality and formal interstate relations. Then diplomacy became professionalized from the 17th to 19th centuries. This covered permanent missions and a strong focus on secrecy and elite negotiation. This classical model enjoyed dominance until the World War I and II exposed some limits. More transparent, multilateral diplomacy was introduced especially with the founding of the UN and the big world wars. Diplomacy then adapted to ideological rivalry

during the Cold War. It focused on deterrence, propaganda, and critical backchannel negotiations like the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT) treaties between the United States and the Soviet Union (Murray, 2012).

After the Cold War, diplomacy expanded more, incorporating non-state actors, soft power, and responses to global issues like climate change and digital threats. Today's diplomacy is more inclusive, blending traditional practices with modern tools. Diplomacy has long been subject to theoretical reflection. This is even before the formal emergence of diplomatic theory. Early approaches were unsystematic and fragmented. It still offers meaningful insights despite being unsystematic. More focus was on systematic frameworks and comprehensive explanations in the modern diplomatic theory (Constantinou et al., 2016).

2.4. Three Schools of Diplomatic Thought

As per the Traditional School, diplomacy is run by states. It is a rational practice with its roots going back to centuries. The other school of thought is the Nascent School which emerged in opposition to the traditional thought. It considered the traditional diplomacy as irrelevant in the face of the current complex world. The criticism comes as non-state actors such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) play significant roles through informal, track-two diplomacy. According to this school, traditional diplomacy is outdated, and incapable of addressing the latest challenges in the contemporary world. Taking the middle ground between the traditional and nascent school of thought is the Innovative School. This school of thought promises to bridging the divide between the ancient and the contemporary. It advocates for a balanced approach that recognizes both state and non-state actors as integral to modern diplomacy. This thought challenges the idea that diplomacy must fit into either Traditional or Nascent categories. Instead, this approach suggests a more flexible and open-minded approach that adapts to global changes. By combining ideas from both perspectives, it encourages new ways of thinking about diplomacy (Murray, 2012).

2.4.1. Traditional Diplomacy and Public Diplomacy

The major difference between traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy falls on their target audiences and methods. In traditional diplomacy, states are the main actors with government

officials engaging in formal negotiations to manage international affairs. On the other hand, PD engages foreign audiences in order to create and strengthen mutual understanding, shape perceptions, and build lasting relationships. All the engagement keeps in mind a nation's diplomatic goals (Cull, 2019). New approaches like "track two diplomacy" emerged as diplomatic activity evolved. This kind of diplomacy involves informal dialogue between non-governmental actors. This has become more prominent. This latest shift clearly indicated the increasing influence of civil society and non-state actors in international relations (Gilboa, 2016).

The introduction of digital technologies has also significantly impacted diplomatic practices. Berridge (2015) explained that new communication channels, such as social media and digital avenues have allowed governments to engage directly with foreign publics. This has expanded the reach and impact of both traditional and public diplomacy. Also, Manor (2019) mentioned that these digital tools enable governments to engage with foreign audiences in real time, making diplomacy more responsive and adaptable to rapidly changing global circumstances. These developments highlight the evolving nature of diplomacy, demonstrating how technological advancements continue to shape both traditional and public diplomatic strategies.

2.4.2. Types of Diplomacy

Huihui (2017) identifies several types of diplomacy, including, but not limited to, informal diplomacy, para-diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, economic diplomacy, gunboat diplomacy, ping-pong diplomacy, preventive diplomacy, public diplomacy, shuttle diplomacy, and transformational diplomacy. Each type of diplomacy has a unique role in the international relations landscape. Public diplomacy, however, stands out from the others in that its influence is indirect. Rather than engaging directly with government officials, public diplomacy targets foreign publics through informal channels like mass media, including the press, the internet, and other specialized networks such as business connections, trade unions, scholarly associations, and religious or cultural institutions. This further illustrates the role of PD in shaping global perceptions and encouraging linkages globally beyond the government to government formal relations. Cultural diplomacy, another category of diplomacy, is recognized as a critical part of PD as per the U.S. Department of State. It is a type of diplomacy that promotes mutual understanding among nations and people by facilitating the exchange of knowledge, ideas and

other cultural expressions. The term *Cultural Diplomacy* was first used in 1959 by a U.S. official named Robert H. Thayer².

2.4.3. Transition to New Diplomacy

A significant variation was observed in transiting from old diplomacy to a new one. Variations were observed in the methods and tools used to achieve diplomatic goals. For the new diplomacy, propaganda and publicity play a big role. Propaganda turns out to be a key instrument of political warfare in the era of new diplomacy. It is actively used to defend national interests and influence foreign publics. The new approach of diplomacy uses mass communication channels. It relies on publicity campaigns, information control, media engagement and the like to shape perceptions and mobilize support for national objectives. As Xu Huihui (2017) explained, old diplomacy relied on formal, legal communications to convey state interests. It was characterized by secrecy and discretion. Communications and diplomatic negotiations were conducted behind closed doors using traditional, government-to-government exchanges. Propaganda was largely avoided. Traditional diplomacy is gradually giving way to newer forms shaped by technological advancements. States are now embracing innovative diplomatic approaches in this evolving landscape (Figus, 2018).

2.4.4. The Role of Diplomats under New Diplomacy

The emergence of new diplomacy is cutting back on the role of actual diplomats. Political leaders can now maintain direct and active contact with one another, reducing the need for diplomats to act as intermediaries between states. The advancements in transport and communication technologies have facilitated avenues for such direct engagements putting aside diplomats from the middle. In the previous traditional diplomacy, diplomats were considered the key links between the host country and sending country. They acted as full representatives with freedom of action in international affairs. However, they have now been relegated to the role of highly dignified messengers in the context of new diplomacy. The role of diplomats has diminished as the control of foreign ministries over diplomats has significantly increased (Huihui, 2017).

² [Seven Myths About Cultural Diplomacy | by U.S. Department of State | U.S. Department of State | Medium](#)

2.4.5. Defining Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy has expanded worldwide, from Latin America to Eastern Europe and Asia, as a strategic means of winning the hearts and minds of foreign audiences (Kim, 2017). Edmund Gullion is credited with coining the term “public diplomacy” in 1965 (Runde & Arceneaux, 2024). He introduced it to describe efforts by governments to communicate directly with foreign publics in order to influence perceptions, foster mutual understanding, and support foreign policy objectives. Public diplomacy (PD) is a relatively new concept in the field of international relations, emerging in the mid-1960s. However, efforts to use persuasive techniques for political or military gain have existed throughout history. For example, during the French Revolution and its aftermath, Napoleon's government effectively employed PD tools, as did England before World War II when it sought to persuade Americans to support their fight against Hitler. Throughout much of the 20th century, the Soviet Union also prioritized PD, alongside covert methods like agitation and propaganda, due to its ideological focus on mobilizing “the masses” (Huihui, 2017).

As noted by Sevin, Metzgar & Hayden (2018), PD refers to some established set of practices through which international actors, primarily nation-states, engage in intentional communication with foreign publics. The goal further supports diplomatic connections with a view to advance foreign policy objectives. The aim can also be to enhance favorable conditions that support mutual relationships. This involves shaping perceptions, building mutual understanding, and cultivating trust in order to create an environment for more strategic goals. For long, PD has been seen as a strategic tool for promoting a country’s soft power, the ability to shape preferences and influence others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion. It refers to the strategies that governments employ to engage foreign publics with the goal of shaping their perceptions and fostering a better understanding of a nation's policies and culture (Nye, 2018).

PD has no generally agreed upon or widely accepted definition. It is generally understood as a platform to connect with audiences globally through the use of information, cultural programs and education. The end objective is supporting a country’s foreign policy goals (Brown, 2017). There are different views adopted by scholars on what PD constitutes and how to make the best out of it. The practice of PD can vary significantly across individual nations. But a common

definition of PD focuses on engaging foreign audiences through developing cooperation in the various aspects of the bilateral engagement including in economy, politics, culture and the like. These all are directed towards ensuring the national interest of a country abroad. Another definition of PD focuses on engaging allies using educational and cultural activities while addressing adversaries using some well-crafted strategic communication approaches. Generally, PD does not undermine the efforts of other actors or other governments. It only serves to portray a positive image of a country (Vellikaya, 2018).

There has been limited consensus among scholars regarding the definition of PD and the most effective ways for states to leverage this practice. While scholars have increasingly focused on analyzing and understanding what exactly PD entails, uncertainty and ambiguity still persist in this evolving field. Since 1965, various developments in the international environment have influenced the conceptualization of PD. The concept is not novel despite it was coined in 1965 by Edmund Gullion. At its core, PD involves the efforts by a country to create a positive impression on the public of another country, essentially aiming to project soft power. Some critics view public diplomacy as mere propaganda, but this interpretation overlooks the fact that propaganda, often lacking credibility, is less likely to attract support, though it may still have other impacts (Nye, 2018).

PD, however, is not simply about running public relations campaigns. While crafting a positive image is part of the process, PD also focuses on building long-term relationships that provide a conducive environment for the policies of a government. The most effective PD is reciprocal, involving not just communication, but also listening. It is about understanding the minds of others, sharing common values, and engaging in meaningful exchanges, rather than merely broadcasting one's message (Nye, 2018). PD is primarily focused on addressing foreign publics, with the aim of enhancing a state's soft power on the global stage. Rooted in International Relations (IR), PD seeks to influence the hearts and minds of international audiences (Kim, 2017).

Key tools in executing PD include educational initiatives, arts and cultural exchange programs, as well as international broadcasting. During the Cold War, many governments allocated substantial financial resources toward these efforts, particularly in the form of education and

cultural exchanges. These were seen as essential to their PD strategies. As Durra (2017) mentioned, the U.S. embarked on huge PD activities after the September 11 attacks as part of its foreign policy and national security tool. In practice, public diplomacy is often limited to providing information and engaging in activities that reflect a country's culture within the broader context of its foreign relations. Besides, the objectives and practices of PD are outward-facing, emphasizing active engagement with foreign populations rather than solely interacting with government officials (Boduszyński, 2018).

Still, Kim (2017) introduced the concept of "new public diplomacy," which she defined as a strategic effort by governments to build credibility, trust, and rapport with foreign publics through two-way communication. Kim identified six key characteristics of this new public diplomacy. It:

- ✚ Emphasizes soft diplomacy,
- ✚ Is concerned with maintaining the international credibility of the nation-state,
- ✚ Fosters two-way and symmetric communication in the digital age,
- ✚ Focuses on collaboration to achieve shared objectives,
- ✚ Engages non-state actors and builds multi-stakeholder partnerships, and
- ✚ Aims to create a favorable diplomatic environment for the nation-state in global politics.

The evolution highlights the growing importance of spaces like American Corners, which serve as operational spaces where such strategies are implemented on the ground. Leaders of the current contemporary world, especially those with regional influence, practice PD as a key element for their soft power influence. They have adopted a new understanding of PD as a key component of their soft power strategies in foreign policy. The practice of soft power has now expanded globally. Many states are adapting and applying it to their own geopolitical contexts and aspirations. But the concept of soft power was initially widely explored through the lens of U.S. foreign policy.

2.4.6. The Northern Conflict, Superpowers and Ethiopia

As Zhao (2020) explained, the outrage by the Western nations and the United States regarding the northern conflict might just be a disguise. These super powers used the situation of the northern conflict to punish Ethiopia to discourage China's influence in the country. Some critic judged that the sanctions by the European Union and the United States were made to put pressure against Ethiopia to discourage its alliance with China. The sanctions were aimed at minimizing China's influence over Ethiopia. As a manifestation of this claim, at the UN Security Council, China repeatedly used its veto power against resolutions on Ethiopia. Zhao's study was also supported by Kirubel (2024) in which China and Russia used their veto powers at the UN Security Council to prevent Western resolutions targeting Ethiopia. The resolutions repeatedly tabled at the UN Security Council against Ethiopia were part of the continued pressure by the Western powers against the federal government of Ethiopia, not against the other party. Another study by Samrawit (2023) also stated that the bilateral relation between Ethiopia and the U.S. since 2018 was shaped by America's interest to counter China's influence in the Horn of Africa. According to Nathan (2022), the Horn of Africa region is a focal point for U.S.-China strategic rivalry. Another study by Worku (2021) also mentioned that the punitive measures and incessant threats used by the U.S. against the Ethiopian federal government had little to do with human rights violations at the time. America's punitive measures were responses to the federal government's refusal to comply with advice to cut ties with China.

During the northern conflict as well, the U.S. used the war as a premise for its own interest. In addition, the news coverage by the Western media about the conflict should also be seen from their political position (Zhao, 2020). Further looking into the bilateral engagement, China's bilateral trade with Ethiopia has increased to \$54 billion while its direct investment (FDI) in Ethiopia has reached \$4 billion. But with all these pressures, Ethiopia did not compromise its position and the pressures might have further pushed Ethiopia more to China as a trustworthy partner. On the other hand, Samrawit (2023) said the U.S. favoring the TPLF was due to its strong leadership practice in Ethiopia.

According to Ambassador Takeda Alemu, the current state of Ethiopia-US relations is somewhat strained due to recent events such as the conflict in Tigray and the dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. There

have been some disagreements and tensions between the two countries, but there are also efforts being made to improve relations. According to the ambassador, the concept of diplomacy is rooted in national interest, and the US is primarily interested in peace in the Red Sea area. The ambassador clarified that US does not have any particular love for the TPLF party, but rather believes that TPLF is more committed and strong enough to lead the country than the current government (Samrawit 2023).

2.4.7. The Northern Conflict & the U.S. -Ethiopia Diplomatic Relations

The northern conflict undermined Ethiopia's longstanding partnership with major superpowers. Its image was shifted from being a pillar of regional stability to a center of international concern over especially human rights violations. This was in connection to the northern war. The U.S. took a more critical stance. It suspended security assistance and imposed sanctions on Ethiopian officials involved in abuses. As Alemu (2022) noted, these unilateral sanctions by the U.S. also included withholding new multilateral development bank lending. Other similar measures were taken to pressure the Ethiopian federal government into reconciliation (Blanchard, 2021).

Ethiopia's prominence globally and its diplomatic accolade was negatively affected by the conflict. The country's bilateral and multilateral relations were affected negatively (Kim, 2024). Mistrust brewed between the United States and Ethiopia. Concerns over the perceived violations of international laws by the federal government of Ethiopia led to the deterioration of the relations. Things got worse when the U.S. administration led by President Biden declared that both sides involved in the northern conflict were guilty of committing war crimes (Blanchard, 2021).

The launch of the formal relationship between Ethiopia and the U.S. dates back to 1903, during the reign of Emperor Menelik (U.S. Embassy Addis Ababa). Since then, the two countries maintained their bilateral relationship for more than a century. Ethiopia was viewed as one of America's strategic partners. The country receives the largest humanitarian and development assistance from the U.S. annually. But the relationships were not without challenges. In

particular, during the military Derg regime, the Ethio-U.S. diplomatic relationship downgraded from the ambassadorial level to Charge d' Affaires status (MoFA Ethiopia).

Lately, the Ethio-U.S. bilateral relationship was challenged due to the northern conflict. The conflict drew global scrutiny because of the humanitarian crisis and reports of starvation and atrocities (Blanchard, 2021). The strain in the bilateral relationship was also mentioned by (Tadesse & Yimer, 2020). Reports of violations during the conflict led the Biden Administration to impose sanctions which saw U.S. assistance to Ethiopia dropped by more than forty percent as the conflict escalated. This was well reflected in the deteriorating bilateral relationship. More importantly, Belay (2023) implicated the U.S. as a party to the conflict rather than an outsider trying to mediate. The study claimed that the U.S. sided with the TPLF during the conflict while China and Russia supported the Ethiopian federal government.

The U.S. Government appeared to deploy various tools to prevent, discourage and stop the conflict. It advocated for diplomatic solutions to stop the conflict. At the same time, it imposed sanctions including visa restrictions against Ethiopian officials citing violations of human rights. On the other hand, the U.S. Government provided victims with humanitarian assistance (Blanchard (2021). Interestingly, American Corners were still operational despite such strained government to government diplomatic relations. The Corners were key platforms for direct engagements with the Ethiopian public on the soft diplomacy aspect.

There is a very limited understanding regarding how the American Corners managed to remain open and serve the community during the conflict. Another significant issue was the lack of specific academic research on the practice of PD in particular at American Corners during times of conflict. During such challenges in the bilateral relation, PD is tested to the limit as such initiatives face lack of attention and resource constraints. Increased scrutiny and limited public access are also expected due to such tensions in the bilateral relations. The increased suspicion associated with the tense diplomatic environment limits the operational capacity of the Spaces. However, to the contrary, the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa eased past the turbulent period maintaining operations at its Corners in different locations.

Disruptions to the international order significantly constrains activities of diplomats in particular and diplomacy in general. Diplomats are challenged during such periods to organize collective actions (Forsberg & Marley, 2020). Creativity and adaptation strategies are essential in such periods in order to secure consensus and ensure peace and security. To intervene and stop conflicts, diplomats and other peace actors need to come up with some viable strategies. For policy makers, relations in the diplomatic sphere are seen as strategies of conflict prevention (Kenkel, 2018). Well established diplomatic relations have proved to reduce the urge for confrontations. But the formal diplomatic engagement can serve as a show of a commitment to resolve conflicts.

2.5. Empirical Review

This section presents the concepts related to the American Spaces with a focus on key themes pertaining to the study. It delves into PD functions as bridges between governments and foreign publics. It underscores the role of public diplomacy in the area of cultural exchanges, international engagements and education. The discussion also explored the American Spaces, noting their role in creating mutual understanding. Through these main themes, this section sets a conceptual foundation for the analysis of the practice of PD at the American Corners during the period of diplomatic tension between the two countries.

2.5.1. U.S. Public Diplomacy Goals in Africa

The U.S. government plans to achieve a couple of goals in pursuit of PD in Sub-Saharan Africa. These goals include strengthening a mutually beneficial U.S.-African partnership as well as supporting the broader U.S. foreign policy objectives. Investing in youth in Africa in recognition to the continent's young population sticks out as another key objective in the long-term engagement in the continent (United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, 2015). The Bureau of African Affairs through its Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Office is behind the policy direction and programmatic support to such initiatives. Among the programs and initiatives include promoting sustainable economic development and advancing regional security. In addition, strengthening democratic institutions, enhancing understanding of the United States, and advocating for U.S. policy priorities are among the other objectives. Teams of

American and locally employed staff at U.S. embassies and consulates across the region implement these PD initiatives mentioned earlier.

The aim of United States public diplomacy efforts is “to support the achievement of US foreign policy goals and advance U.S. national interests.” The U.S. employs public diplomacy as tool for promoting democracy, increasing regional and global economic and political stability and strengthening its global economic and political ties. Through public diplomacy, the U.S. Government seeks to “understand, inform, engage and influence global audiences, reaching beyond foreign governments to promote greater appreciation and understanding of US society, culture, institutions, values and policies (Durra, 2017)

The primary targets of these initiatives are women, youth and entrepreneurs in Africa. The African Diaspora is also the other segment of the target audience, along with journalists, civil society leaders and scholars. English language instruction, educational advising, and cultural programming are among the main programs hosted to facilitate in-person engagements. These activities are carried out at the American Spaces throughout the continent. Besides, programs such as Fulbright and Humphrey Fellowships, the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP), and American speaker and cultural initiatives are implemented to enhance the people-to-people exchanges (United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, 2015).

2.5.2. Ethiopia and the Northern Conflict

On November 4, 2020, a well-prepared Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) launched an evening assault on federal army bases in the Tigray Region (Abbink, 2021). Also, according to Blanchard (2021), the war started after the TPLF forces attacked federal military bases in Tigray. But the TPLF played the underdog and portrayed as the victim by the world media and affiliates of the TPLF. Nathan (2022) noted that even the U.S. condemned the attack by the TPLF on the federal army base in Tigray. The war then expanded into areas neighboring Tigray as the TPLF ventured into other regions for control. Amhara and Afar regional states were affected by the TPLF’s incursions into the two regions. The conflict turned into a geopolitical issue as neighboring countries, such as Sudan, Somalia and Egypt were trying to have a say making use

of the opportunity. But at its onset, the conflict was primarily a domestic problem in Ethiopia. This was an example of how a domestic issue can have a disruptive impact on the geopolitics as well as international relations. Sudan was maneuvering at the Ethiopian border while Ethiopia's withdrawal³ of troops from the AMISOM has led to more terror activities by the Al Shabab in Somalia.

The international community tried to respond in some way. The U.S. and other countries and international entities such as the European Union and the United Nations tried to respond to the crisis. In general, the response by the international community, and especially by the U.S. was perceived as targeting the Ethiopian government, not the perpetrator - the TPLF. There was also another dangerous claim that the Biden Administration supported armed insurrection by the TPLF against the federal government (Alemu, 2022). The U.S. was accused of favoring the TPLF over the federal government at the time. Another writer, Biset (2023) indicated that the reporting by the international media was not adequately researched.

...the media emphasized stories that threatened the harmony of society and that the BBC, AP, and Reuters failed to follow journalistic ethics and principles when covering. Their reporting of the war contained a lot of biased, uneven, and unsubstantiated information. In addition, [it] looked at how the BBC, CNN, and France 24 were portraying the conflict between TPLF and the central government of Ethiopia. The results showed that conflict was the most common news frame on the BBC, CNN, and France 24. Government officials were the most often used news sources in the media. The results also demonstrate that the news presentation's negative tone predominated over its positive tone. Finally, the results show that the TPLF forces were given favorable news coverage in the Western media (Biset, 2023).

2.5.3. American Spaces

American Spaces are physical platforms established outside the United States to inform and engage foreign audiences (USACPD, 2015). These Spaces lay the foundation for America's PD efforts in foreign countries. For people who may never travel to the United States, these spaces

³ [Ethiopia withdraws more troops from Somalia](#)

provide an important platform to learn about the American culture, foreign policy and people. U.S. officials also use the platform to directly engage with foreign citizens, many of whom may have no contact with Americans. The Spaces also connect the United States with the host country. Another key importance of the Spaces is that they foster the cultural and social ties between both nations. They facilitate a two-way flow of information as the U.S. develops relationships with host country people, media, activists, youth, students, academics, writers, cultural figures and others. In short, these Spaces are platforms for American officials to create and maintain relationships with foreign audience. They help in ensuring the security and broader foreign policy goals of the U.S.

Local audiences are the main targets of the American Corners which create the platform for their active engagement (Kanyundo & Dube, 2018). The Corners are the main cultural and information centers of the U.S. government outside the United States. Local communities, in each country where the U.S. Embassies located, receive free and open access to information about the United States. These Spaces provide the people of the host countries with a window into American culture and values (Fialho, 2013, cited in Kanyundo & Dube, 2018). They are innovative hubs equipped with advanced technologies. They facilitate people-to-people connections as well.

These spaces may have various names depending on their location. But “American Corners” is our main focus for this research. Here is some information on the different names of the American Spaces. American Corners are partner locations which are usually embedded within national and local libraries or on university campuses. American Centers are often located inside U.S. Missions or Embassies. Also, there are other names associated with these Spaces such as Affiliate Spaces, American Hubs, America Houses, or InfoUSA Centers, among others. But all Spaces operate with the support of U.S. missions in host countries as well as in partnership with local governments or institutions.

2.5.4. Strategic Importance of American Spaces

Many of the visitors to the American Corners have no direct experience with Americans. These spaces, therefore, provide platforms for American officials to directly engage with foreign nationals. The millions of visitors worldwide are exposed to a range of key PD initiatives of the

U.S. government at the Corners. The programs hosted in these Spaces are built around six core themes. These are English language teaching and learning, Educational advising for study in the United States, Information about the United States, American cultural programs, networking with U.S. exchange program alumni and professional skills building. Visitors in areas where internet access is restricted can enjoy free, open and uncensored internet with the best available broadband capacity (The Office of American Spaces).

Services and programs offered at the American Corners include cultural exchange, Education USA, and others that nurture the soft power diplomacy of the United States. Many of the visitors to the Corners are youth who make use of the free and reliable internet access. They also benefit from trainings in digital literacy and courses on the latest technology, information about the U.S. and many other topics. New graduates receive information on building various life skills, preparing for job opportunities and developing skills of dialogue. Other topics include political and socio-cultural aspects. Visitors also engage in activities that enhance their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The Spaces are safe for young people to openly exchange views on topics such as human rights, elections, anti-corruption, women's empowerment and other similar strong themes. Still other themes entertained at the Spaces cover the American culture and values, issues related to the bilateral relations, and Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) fields. Overall, these centers reinforce public diplomacy objectives of the United States in host countries (Kanyundo & Dube, 2018).

Satchmo Center



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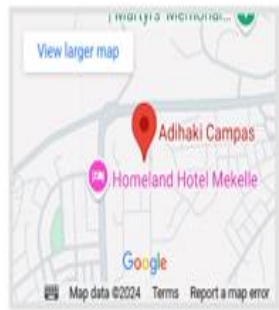
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Mekelle American Corner



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Figure 2. 1: American Spaces in Ethiopia

Source: U.S. Embassy, Addis Ababa

2.5.5. American Spaces Worldwide

The first American Space was established in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1927. That shows these Spaces enjoy a long and evolving history at international level. They support the U.S. government's efforts of PD throughout the world. Among the programs and courses offered at these Spaces, entrepreneurship and English language learning emerge as the most popular for visitors. The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs provides strategic guidance, financial support and oversight of these Spaces globally. The courses given and events hosted at these Spaces are consistently in alignment with the broader U.S. foreign policy objectives (the Office of American Spaces). American Corners exist in 140 countries worldwide reaching more than 700 locations. These Spaces build connections between the United States and communities across the world. Run by U.S. embassies in partnership with local institutions, these Spaces are strategically aligned to U.S. foreign policy and national security goals. They showcase the core values of the United States and reflect the American spirit to international audiences. They support American interests, create a better understanding of the United States, and avail opportunities for the United States to connect with aspiring leaders (USACPD, 2015).

2.5.6. American Corners in Ethiopia

American Corners are established with the primary objective of fostering connections between the United States and youth in other countries (Chronicles of American Corners, 2022). As outposts of American public diplomacy, these Spaces work to support, nurture, and strengthen bilateral relationships with other foreign countries. The Corners have informational and cultural functions. They serve as catalysts for partnerships between the U.S. and foreign institutions. In the case of Ethiopia, selected regional capitals host these Spaces. Visitors to the Corners can make use of a range of available resources, benefiting them in their overall growth and development.

In Ethiopia, there are six American Spaces (U.S. Embassy, Addis Ababa). While two are located in the capital, the rest four are located in Jimma, Dire Dawa, Bahir Dar and Mekelle. These Spaces create platforms for engagement with the local Ethiopian populace. For example, in Bahirdar, Jimma and Diredawa, they are located within local public libraries. The Mekelle American Corner is located inside the Mekelle University Adi-Haki Campus. The American

Corner in Addis Ababa is hosted by St. Mary's University, Mexico Campus. This particular Corner was originally hosted at the National Archives and Library Agency (NALA) before it moved to its current location. As part of advancing U.S. foreign policy objectives, the American Corners in Ethiopia have played a vital role. They have offered resources for education, language as well as cultural exchange programs and opportunities. Despite such contributions by the Corners in the soft power aspect, the works of these Corners were impacted by the strained government to government relations during the war period. The Ethio-U.S. bilateral relationship, strained due to the northern war, further escalated to the extent of the U.S. imposing targeted sanctions against Ethiopia (Hurley, 2023).

Another sanction against Ethiopian officials was the visa restriction by the U.S. government in connection to the conflict. Other powerful countries or blocks, such as the EU, also followed by imposing sanctions against Ethiopia. Hence, keeping up the effective PD works at the American Corners had become increasingly challenging due to the prevailing difficult situation. The ability of American Corners to sustain engagement with the Ethiopian public during the conflict period was also challenged. This period in the bilateral engagement required some adaptations to the evolving situation in an effort to maintain operations (Brooke-Holland, 2021).

There is an extremely limited scholarly literature on the practice of public diplomacy at the American Corners during times of war. This is despite the growing significance of American Corners in U.S. public diplomacy. The study by Kanyundo and Dube (2018) was one of the few academic contributions to this particular subject. The work was titled *American Corners, A New Service with a New Taste in University Libraries: How Communities Are Benefiting from Mzuzu University American Corner*. However, this work did not analyze the strategic use of these American Corners during conflict. It primarily focused on describing the services offered, largely taken from U.S. Embassy websites. Another related effort was *An External Evaluation of Kosovo's American Corners Program*. This research was conducted by Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis in 2020. The piece focused on assessing program activities but did not explore their role in wartime or crisis communication. U.S. Government sources such as the State Department and U.S. Embassy websites served as main sources of the vast majority of information on American Corners. The studies presented were informational contents rather than critical or analytical researches. Another study by Durra (2017) under the title *United States*

public diplomacy efforts during Obama's administration to combat Islamic extremist mostly used facts and data from U.S. government sponsored websites. These and others showed the existing gap in literature which was limited on mentioning websites run by the U.S. government or its branch offices and missions.

2.6. Synthesis and Research Gaps

Conceptual and theoretical foundations have been dealt with through existing literature. Such a robust focus helps in better understanding PD and soft power dynamics. Contemporary studies highlight the importance of credibility, narrative framing, and people-to-people engagement in advancing foreign policy objectives (Cull, 2019). However, significant gaps remain, particularly regarding the real-time function of cultural diplomacy institutions during active interstate conflicts. In the context of Ethiopia, and more specifically during the northern conflict (2020–2022), there had been limited academic investigation into the roles played by American Corners. These centers function as vital nodes of American public diplomacy, offering resources, programming, and platforms for dialogue. Yet, their practical operation, audience reception, and diplomatic significance during moments of heightened political tension remain underexplored.

The U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa⁴ and affiliated PD outlets and U.S. government websites are the ones documenting about American Corners. These sources provide strategic priorities, official data and communications. But these sites avail factual information rather than serving as research points that undertake systematic analysis like in academic papers. Besides, scholarly discourse lacks a grounded understanding of how PD is practiced in fragile or conflict-affected settings, especially through cultural institutions like American Corners.

Further scholarly attention is required especially in three critical areas. The first area is about the functional mechanisms for soft power initiatives like American Corners to navigate the divide between coercive state actions and grassroots engagement. This focuses on making local U.S. cultural diplomacy efforts to remain credible and accessible during times of political discord. The second one is about visitor participation in shaping the reception and outcomes of such programs. More research is required on how visitors interpret, adapt, or resist the messages embedded in U.S. public diplomacy programming. The third focuses on the longitudinal impact

⁴ [American Spaces - U.S. Embassy in Ethiopia \(usembassy.gov\)](https://usembassy.gov)

of these efforts on post-conflict reconciliation processes. Little is known about whether and how American Corners contribute to social healing, trust-building, or knowledge exchange in post-conflict environments. In addressing these unexplored dimensions, the research adds to the academic discourse on soft power and PD. It contributes to the betterment of strategies in diplomacy in the current era of escalating global tensions and uneven geopolitical alliances. The case in Ethiopia presents an important and timely opportunity to critically examine how cultural institutions function as sites of outreach during challenging times.

CHAPTER 3. MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

3.1. Impact of the Northern Conflict on American Corners' Operations

The daily functions of the American Corners in Ethiopia were negatively impacted due to the outbreak of the northern conflict. The national crisis disrupted programming, disconnected communication channels, impacted staff, and necessitated operational restructuring. The experiences of staff and stakeholders across different Corners revealed the different ways in which the conflict strained PD operations. Despite the negative impacts, the crisis meanwhile created an opportunity in encouraging innovative ways of engaging with the local Ethiopian populace. Several impacts of the conflict on the Corners were presented below, accompanied by testimonies from the in-depth interviews.

3.1.1. Impact on Programming

One of the most immediate and profound impacts of the northern conflict on American Corners in Ethiopia was the disruption of programming. In locations, especially closer to the conflict, holding in person sessions was unthinkable. The declaration of a national state of emergency and the intensification of armed conflict made in-person sessions difficult. Key informants emphasized that the climate of fear, trauma, and instability, particularly in Bahir Dar, made it unsafe and emotionally challenging to host any gatherings. They noted that the pervasive presence of gunfire and public discourse dominated by war-related anxiety significantly disrupted the environment needed for constructive programming.

Under the state of emergency, public gatherings were officially restricted, effectively prohibiting the organization of any in-person programs. That was according to an informant from Bahir Dar. The members of staff were ready to engage the community but the legal and social constraints imposed by the emergency decree made it impossible to conduct regular programming activities. Many initiatives were either postponed or cancelled altogether due to the political situation. There was a sharp reduction in the number of weekly programs. That was just one of the key consequences of the conflict. Respondents mentioned that the frequency of activities fell dramatically. Previously, as many as seven sessions per week were organized but that figure was cut to as few as two. The respondents mentioned the fluctuating perception of visitors and safety conditions as reasons for the decline in the number of events. Visitor registration also dropped

significantly. This was because some attendees became hesitant and were unable to attend even virtual sessions.

The transition to remote programming formats was pursued as an alternative to maintain operations. But across regions, the feasibility of such a shift was inconsistent. Severe infrastructural challenges posed additional setbacks to the issue. In places like Mekelle and Bahir Dar, informants pointed to prolonged internet and phone service outages. Such disruptions affected communication lines between local Corners and the center. This made it impossible to plan, promote, or execute virtual programs, even when staff were willing to continue hosting them.

In Mekelle, the impact was particularly devastating. There was a complete shutdown of the American Corner. Internet blackouts also led to a complete stoppage of virtual programs and the total loss of virtual audience from Mekelle. Coordinators emphasized that without connectivity, they were unable to continue existing sessions, and coordinate new ones or maintain links with participants. Multiple testimonies highlighted the difficulty to reach broader audiences due to barriers to the digital communication. Overall, the northern conflict created a hostile operational environment that critically undermined programming at the American Corners. The ability of the Corners to maintain consistent PD initiatives was disrupted by a number of challenges including restrictions, safety concerns, emotional strain, and infrastructural breakdowns. The key informants widely acknowledged that the situation hindered their outreach efforts. It also disrupted the long-standing community trust and engagement built through consistent, high-quality programming.

3.1.2. No Internet

The widespread disruption of internet and phone services severely hindered the operations of American Corners during the northern conflict. The disconnection of digital communication infrastructure entirely severed the Corners' linkage with central coordination offices and technical support mechanisms. It prevented routine correspondence with the center or the Embassy. Due to the digital isolation, remote programming became impossible in some locations. Key informants indicated that the prolonged internet blackouts in places like Mekelle

had a crippling effect. The American Corner in Mekelle previously maintained a substantial virtual audience. But it lost all of its online participants during the conflict. There was no internet access at the time of the conflict. Staff were unable to maintain any digital outreach, coordinate with embassy personnel, or submit regular program reports.

The loss of connectivity was a critical obstacle even for some staff members willing to continue programming. One informant from Mekelle described that both communication and programming were completely stalled in the absence of digital tools. The communication breakdowns undermined long-term planning, monitoring, and evaluation of public diplomacy activities. This is in addition to the disruptions caused to the day-to-day operations. There was difficulty to maintain a steady line of communication with the broader U.S. public diplomacy network. This ultimately contributed to the suspension or collapse of programming in the most affected areas – Mekelle and Bahir Dar.

3.1.3. Closure

The American Corner in Mekelle was shut down at the onset of the conflict. The Bahir Dar Corner was also shut down for in-person events. These two Corners were impacted due to being the epicenter as well as proximity to the war zone, respectively. The closure of the Mekelle Corner was directly linked to the shutdown of its host institution, Mekelle University, which also suspended all academic activities. The sudden onset of the conflict and the collapse of institutional infrastructure left no room for consultation or contingency planning. The closure was both abrupt and indefinite. As the Mekelle respondents mentioned, the Mekelle Corner was shut down immediately after the outbreak of the conflict. The situation at the time was described as too unpredictable for any programmatic activity to continue.

We were forced to close the American Corner in Mekelle immediately when the war broke out. There were no enabling circumstances for the Corner to continue operating, as the host institution, Mekelle University, was itself closed. We did not consult the Embassy about the closure because the war erupted suddenly. As a result, the Corner was completely shut down immediately after the conflict began (coordinator of the Mekelle Corner).

The decision to shut down the Mekelle American Corner was made at the Corner level, prioritizing the safety of staff and the difficulty of maintaining operations under such conditions. The Bahir Dar Corner was compelled to suspend all in-person sessions for an extended period. However, it was not entirely shut down. The escalating situation forced the suspension of operations. There was also an imminent danger or potential risk to both staff and visitors. The informants from Bahir Dar described the persistent insecurity and a lack of enabling condition which made the environment unfit for safe public engagement. Also, any form of gathering was too dangerous at the time. The closures in Mekelle and temporary suspension in Bahir Dar showed how conflict can have a huge negative impact on PD infrastructure. These cases demonstrated the vulnerability of U.S.-affiliated outreach centers in volatile regions. The situation also urged for a crisis response planning. It underscored the critical importance of preparedness and flexibility in responding to such situations.

3.1.4. Corner Staff Impacted

When the conflict escalated, the staff of the Mekelle and Bahir Dar American Corners were put in a dangerous situation. Their safety and security were compromised. The Mekelle staff fled the area while the Bahir Dar staff was subjected to uncertain situation. There was considerable emotional stress among the staff. Their fear and stress level grew due to their association with the U.S. embassy. At the time, Bahir Dar was not at the epicenter of the conflict. The research indicated staff members experienced direct threats to their physical safety due to the conflict. Staff were subjected to suspicion and isolation due to their affiliation to the Embassy. In addition to the critical issue of safety and security, the circumstance led to feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty about their future. It mirrored the experiences reported by the American Corner staff in Mekelle. The study underscored the critical need for psychological support and institutional mechanisms to protect and assist local staff operating in volatile environments.

The Mekelle staff received no support during the critical phases of the conflict. Some staff members reported taking sudden measures to avoid detection, such as hiding their American Corner identification cards as a way-out mechanism. As an example of abandonment and vulnerability, the Mekelle informants mentioned that the U.S. Embassy did not make any contacts with staff of the Mekelle Corner for the entire two-year duration of the conflict. Staff

felt the ripple effects of the deteriorating diplomatic environment even in areas outside the primary conflict zones, such as Bahir Dar. The affiliation with the U.S. government, which was previously a point of pride, became a source of personal tension and public scrutiny during the conflict.

3.1.5. Corner Relocation

The relocation of one of the American Corners in Addis Ababa was considered one of the direct impacts of the northern conflict on the American Corners. The Corner was forced to vacate its space by government officials. The relocation could also be taken as a direct sign of the deterioration of the diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Ethiopia. The relocation followed the decision by the government officials. From the American side, the relocation was aimed to maintain operations in a more stable environment. The John C. Robinson American Corner, originally housed at the National Archives and Library Agency (NALA), a government owned facility, was forced to relocate. The host institution, a federal government body, decided to terminate the occupancy agreement, according to the respondent who is the American Officer. The relocation of the Corner created a disruption to the long-established operations of the Corner.

The John C. Robinson American Corner was originally located at NALA, the National Archives Organization. However, the host organization, in this case, the federal government, decided to close down our occupancy, which was within their rights. As a result, we discontinued that relationship and began searching for a new home. Eventually, we found another location and moved once again to our current home at St. Mary's University here in Addis Ababa (an American Officer).

The Embassy then moved the Corner to a new location, at the St. Mary's University near Mexico Square in Addis Ababa. Programming started once the relocation was complete, gradually attracting visitors. The Corner regained visibility and now operating at standard level. However, the transition was not without its challenges. Informants noted decrease in the number of visitors at the beginning.

3.1.6. Ordered Departure

When the conflict escalated, diplomats at the U.S. mission in Ethiopia were ordered to leave the country. American Officers who supported the Corner operations directly or in other ways also left the country. It was the security concern that forced the departure of the American Officers at the U.S. mission in Ethiopia. Despite the departure of the American Officers, the American Corners continued their operation. Local staff maintained the functions of the Corners.

I would like to emphasize an important point: even during the time of the ordered departure, and we're very proud of this, our American Spaces staff in the supporting cities never missed a single day. Whether during COVID, the conflict, or the period when we were away, they continued providing virtual programming, courses, study groups, and more without interruption. It was a wonderful lifeline to the U.S. diplomatic presence here in Ethiopia. We offered that service consistently, with no break of any kind (an American Officer).

The local staff exhibited remarkable dedication in ensuring the continued functionality of American Corners at the time. The staff adapted effectively to evolving political dynamics and logistical challenges. Their efforts underscored the indispensable role local actors play in maintaining public diplomacy infrastructure during periods of political upheaval and institutional uncertainty. The departure of the American staff exposed the fragility of embassy-linked programming in conflict zones. But on the other hand, it highlighted the strength of the relationships established between American Corners and their host communities. This experience highlighted the critical need for decentralization of the support systems, and enhanced contingency planning. It also called for sustained investment in local staff to safeguard program continuity in the absence of the American diplomats.

3.2. Strategies for Sustaining Public Diplomacy during the Conflict

3.2.1. Preparedness

There was a commendable level of preparedness when the conflict suddenly erupted. The advance preparation enabled the staff to respond to emerging challenges with relative efficiency and confidence. Proactive measures were implemented prior to the crisis, including briefings, orientation sessions, and capacity-building initiatives. The preparatory works provided staff with psychological readiness to navigate the uncertainties and disruptions caused by the conflict. It was learned from the key informants that the orientations they received in advance of the conflict was instrumental in helping them maintain operational stability during the conflict. Staff members were equipped with the information and psychological mindset necessary to respond calmly and strategically during such events. Such orientation was given in anticipation of potential disruptions to programming as well as a psychological preparedness to critical inquiries. This proactive approach allowed staff to navigate conflict-related challenges without succumbing to panic. It created a sense of collective resilience mechanism. One coordinator specifically emphasized the value of pre-conflict trainings, noting that the mental preparedness instilled through these efforts was crucial to ensure program continuity under pressure. Staff maintained morale and effective internal coordination due to their supportive and collaborative attitude. This helped the Corners to maintain functions, even as external conditions deteriorated.

3.2.2. Shifts in Practices

A great deal of transformation was observed in the operational practices of American Corners during the period of the conflict. Focus was directed on critical skill development and other social topics. The shift was in a direct response to the evolving situation as well as the needs of local communities during the crisis. In Bahir Dar, for instance, staff switched to regular phones to maintain internal coordination and attend regular staff meetings. This adaptation allowed staff to sustain communication despite the risks and disruptions associated with other typical channels of communication. This approach ensured that essential information sharing and decision-making could continue even under adverse conditions.

The visitor management practices, especially at the American Center located inside the U.S. Embassy, was another aspect that saw some change of practice during the northern conflict. The escalating security risks necessitated increased screening procedures. Previously, event invitations were openly distributed to the public. But due to the security concerns, invitations were moved to closed Telegram groups, limiting participation to small groups with a view to mitigate potential threats. These operational adaptations enabled American Corners to maintain continuity and relevance in their programming despite the challenging environment. They also served as protection for the safety and security of staff and participants. One informant detailed about the shift in focus areas of programs at the Corners. According to the informant, programming shifted toward skill development courses covering social issues, courses on leadership, game development, 3D modeling, and virtual business talks with entrepreneurs.

Initially, some American Corners incorporated business topics as part of their regular presentations. But due to policy decisions by the U.S. government affecting the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), some planned business topics were dropped. Accordingly, resources were redirected toward other initiatives, such as English language training and skills development. This helped the Corners to maintain programmatic activities despite the disruptions. An American officer clarified that there was no direct policy that required the suspension of specific events or programs. But the regular programming went on with an emphasis on technology, soft skills development, including English language courses and similar others. According to one coordinator, these programs remained largely unaffected by the conflict, despite the fact that tension from the war was evident throughout the country.

3.2.3. Technology

Technology had a big stake in enabling American Corners to maintain their PD initiatives despite the conflict. Security concerns and movement restrictions made in person events impossible. Then the Corners shifted to virtual platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet. This pro-technology transition facilitated the continuation of programming in areas where internet connectivity remained stable. The virtual tools increased the frequency of events organized remotely, with some sessions attracting large online audiences. This digital engagement expanded the reach of American Corners beyond traditional physical boundaries. The

introduction of technology ensured continued engagement with local communities. The adoption of virtual platforms was an illustration of how public diplomacy initiatives can be flexible and adapt to crisis situations by making use of technology and maintaining communication and educational outreach.

The period was marked by the growing popularity of virtual programming at the Corner. The number of virtual participants often exceeded 140 per session, which I don't think in-person trainings could have attracted. One positive aspect of virtual training was that participants could join from anywhere. For example, I was originally in the Amhara region but had to move to my family in Dire Dawa because of the war. This allowed me the opportunity to both attend trainings and give courses at the Corner remotely (Dire Dawa Corner visitor).

Beginning with the COVID-19 pandemic, technology became indispensable as one informant from Bahir Dar mentioned. Technology continued to play a critical role throughout the northern conflict as well. A program officer noted that they embraced new approaches as traditionally in-person visits and events were adopted into formats better suited for virtual delivery. This shift was necessary due to the challenges of hosting physical gatherings amid health concerns and conflict-related restrictions. Similarly, a coordinator highlighted that many programs were conducted virtually during the conflict and that virtual presentations have remained a core component of American Corners' outreach efforts. These adaptations reflected a broader trend of going digital to sustain educational and cultural programming in difficult circumstances.

We had to innovate and adopt virtual technology when the situation changed. That was to make our programs accessible to people wherever they were. In-person gatherings were prohibited at the time due to the state of emergency law in the country. As a result, people could only attend our programs from home or wherever they happened to be. This shift to virtual programming was innovative in itself (Senior Coordinator of American Corners).

A senior officer described the transition to virtual programming as a positive development. The informant noted that the initiative introduced new technologies to the public and actively

engaged Ethiopian youth in diverse skill-building activities. Beyond the traditional in-person audiences, the shift to virtual was well received and expanded the reach of American Corners. Another program officer explained that when the state of emergency banned in-person gatherings, the Corner staff innovatively adopted virtual platforms to ensure programs remained accessible remotely. This adaptation allowed participants to join sessions from their homes or other locations, overcoming physical restrictions imposed by the national law. Another coordinator further emphasized the strategic use of various technologies to maintain connections with audiences during periods when access to the Corners was limited. These efforts were instrumental in sustaining engagement and continuity of programming despite the challenging environment.

3.2.4. New Courses

American Corners introduced innovative program formats and course topics that directly addressed the evolving needs and sensitivities of their local communities. That was in an effort to remain responsive and relevant during the period of the conflict. Initiatives focusing on peace were launched to assist communities in processing and navigating conflict-induced trauma. One notable example was the *Cat Park* course that focused on combating misinformation and disinformation. Participants also gained insights into U.S. policies and the activities of American Corners through the *Chat with the Diplomat* series. An informant from Bahir Dar highlighted the effectiveness of this program in demystifying complex issues and fostering constructive dialogue.

...the Cat Park is a digital tool used to educate young people about misinformation and disinformation, and it's being effectively utilized in the centers. These tools not only helped change perceptions but also built the capacity of young people to identify misinformation. They learned how to recognize false information, which empowered attendees of the American Spaces to critically assess and challenge incorrect narratives. Since much of the misinformation shaped their perceptions, this capacity-building was crucial (a visitor of the Satchmo American Center).

Book Clubs were introduced as part of new programming to promote reading, critical thinking, and open dialogue. Themes of courses offered at the Corners were focused on personal development, technical skills, research and other similar skill development areas, creating a

productive and focused learning environment. The programs maintained a positive impact during the politically sensitive period due to their neutral and non-political content. These adaptations contributed to strengthening community resilience in constructive and politically neutral approach. They allowed American Corners to sustain their mission of informing and educating.

3.2.5. Reduced Visibility

During the conflict, American Corners deliberately minimized their public visibility. This was aimed at ensuring both safety and operational continuity. Large-scale events were avoided, and the physical presence of staff and programs within communities was minimized. Corners were able to continue their work by maintaining a low-profile approach. Such approaches avoided unwanted attention in politically sensitive and unstable environments. A participant from Bahir Dar explained that they intentionally avoided high visibility and limited activities to light, non-controversial engagements. The shift was a cautious strategy in response to the security context. Another informant noted that public-facing initiatives were suspended in favor of more closed-group engagement. The amplification of programs was intentionally scaled down until the environment became more stable. This intentional reduction in visibility was a necessary adaptation that balanced the need for continued local engagement.

Previously, when inviting visitors to the Corner, we would send out text messages that specifically mentioned the American Corner by name. However, due to the conflict and the tense atmosphere, we were forced to suspend any promotions that explicitly included the name 'America.' The situation among the general public was very sensitive and unstable. As a result, we had to adapt our outreach strategies to be more discreet, prioritizing the safety of both our staff and the community while still trying to maintain engagement as best as we could under the circumstances (Bahir Dar Corner Coordinator).

3.2.6. Avoidance

During the conflict, one of the main operational strategies implemented was the intentional avoidance of controversial contents. Programs that addressed sensitive themes, such as politics, governance, freedom of expression, religion, and similar others were deliberately excluded. This

is to maintain neutrality and reduce the risk of negative repercussions from local actors. One program coordinator emphasized the importance of neutrality in such a volatile environment. The informant said program activities were carefully crafted to avoid any content that might be perceived as political. Topics related to religion, including those touching on freedom of speech, media, or governance, were intentionally omitted to prevent misunderstandings. This form of self-censorship was crucial for preserving the integrity of the Corners and ensuring the safety of staff, participants and the facility. By consciously avoiding potentially contentious subjects, American Corners managed to sustain their core educational and cultural missions without becoming entangled in politically sensitive issues.

3.2.7. Promotions Suspended

There was a significant change in terms of promotional activities at the American Corners. Many promotional activities were suspended due to growing public skepticism and heightened political tensions due to the war. Invitations of visitors were managed through more closed-group platforms like Telegram. This was because mass outreach tools, such as bulk SMS messaging were restricted. This reduction in public visibility was deliberate and a strategic measure intended to preserving safety and minimizing the risk of increasing suspicion in an already sensitive environment.

Due to the prevailing negative public sentiment, open promotion of programming at the Corners were dramatically minimized. Outreach programs, events and activities were suspended during the conflict period. That was due to the atmosphere of presumed mistrust against the intent of American diplomacy in Ethiopia. As explained earlier, a key informant mentioned that previous practices, such as sending text messages explicitly mentioning the American Corner, were avoided due to fears that even referencing “America” in communications could provoke negative reactions. This shift came in response to the broader political climate and reflected a conscious effort to adapt PD tactics to avoid potential backlash or misunderstanding. These adjustments highlighted the necessity for PD initiatives to remain flexible and sensitive to local contexts, especially during periods of political instability and conflict.

3.2.8. Awareness Creation

Most of the American Corners made deliberate efforts to continue engaging with the local community, regardless of the challenges imposed by the conflict. These initiatives, despite being low key and very much scaled down, demonstrated a strong commitment to the core values of PD and a determination to remain active in challenging circumstances. Supporting peace building, defusing social tensions and enhancing media literacy to combat misinformation became critical components of PD in such crisis contexts. When approached with questions, often shaped by misperceptions, staff members addressed them by clarifying the core missions of the American Corners. One program coordinator highlighted the importance of explaining the non-political and educational nature of American Spaces to maintain understanding and trust.

Thus, in order to change their attitudes and help them make informed decisions, we provided clear information about our activities, which made a significant difference. When people with differing views came to the Corner and volunteered as trainers, we ensured they received comprehensive information about the Corner and its programs to prevent any confusion (Bahir Dar Corner Coordinator).

Another Bahir Dar informant mentioned instances where individuals with differing viewpoints engaged with the Corner, including some who later volunteered as trainers. The Bahir Dar staff worked on clearing misunderstandings by providing factual information about the Corner to participants and especially volunteers. This helped counter misunderstandings and reduce potential tensions. Another informant described personal efforts to emphasize the non-political nature of the programming. They also tried to clarify that their involvement was voluntary and for educational purposes. Overall, consistent engagements proved to be vital in maintaining public trust and strengthening community resilience during a politically sensitive period.

The only thing I can say is that, although there were some initial challenges regarding participants' perceptions, over time we were able to address these through ongoing open discussions and briefings from the Public Affairs Department, who engaged directly with participants. These platforms created positive momentum, helping young people and attendees truly understand what American Spaces do, their purpose, and the position of the American Embassy. Such platforms are invaluable. The continued engagement and

work of the American Spaces have effectively brought the public, the American Embassy, and even the American people together in a shared space (a visitor to the American Corner in Addis Ababa).

3.3. Influence of U.S. hard power on soft power initiatives at American Corners

3.3.1. Change of Narratives against the U.S.

Public narratives about the U.S. during the northern conflict saw some form of transformation. There was an increasingly critical reporting by the local media regarding the presence and engagement of the U.S. in Ethiopia. The local media in their report made some implications about the U.S. role in the conflict. The media made accusations against the U.S. with allegations of sponsoring the conflict. These targeted allegations significantly affected the perception of the local people towards the U.S. These negative narratives eroded trust and affected the implementation of PD activities at the Corners. A climate of suspicion was created following accusations that the U.S. was supporting a faction in the conflict. These complicated efforts of promoting events and programs under the brand of the U.S. government. Staff at some Corners expressed fears of being targeted or falsely accused of political espionage.

In some instances, these accusations against the U.S. went beyond just media narratives. Mekelle informants mentioned some critical accusations against the U.S. government going to the extreme. The informants cited some rumors that falsely claimed the Mekelle American corner as a covert CIA office. Other rumors also claimed the American Corner in Mekelle was an unofficial U.S. consulate. Despite these all rumors and accusations, informants said there was no threat or attack against the facilities or staff. But these misperceptions impacted the reputation of the Corners as well as public perception of American Corners, with perceived changes from neutral cultural and educational facilities to instruments of foreign interference.

People frequently asked us about our affiliation, the administration of the Corner, and the reporting system. At the time, rumors circulated claiming that the U.S. Government had opened a consulate office in Mekelle, largely because of the presence of the Mekelle American Corner. When the government controlled Mekelle, there was widespread suspicion towards us. We were perceived as spies working for the U.S. Government. As a result, we

were closely associated with the Corner and, by extension, with the U.S. Government itself. Many people viewed the U.S. as a key actor in the conflict, which led to numerous challenges for us as staff members (Coordinator of the Mekelle American Corner).

These dangerous rumors and claims were allegedly circulated by some government affiliated activists and associated media outlets.

3.3.2. Suspicion

Staff was subjected to suspicion because of the increased public skepticism regarding the United States' role in the northern conflict. Staff increasingly found themselves under scrutiny. Some were accused of possessing insider knowledge about upcoming political developments, while others were viewed with suspicion as alleged proxies of U.S. foreign policy interests. This perception created an environment of fear and uncertainty, with staff members feeling vulnerable due to their association with the U.S. mission. Previously, before the war, staff of the American Corners were viewed positively as facilitators of educational and cultural exchange.

At that time, we were even hesitant to announce programs using the name 'American Embassy' because it was perceived as a threat. Many believed the Embassy was supporting certain groups involved in the conflict. We often noticed people whispering among themselves, creating an atmosphere of suspicion. At the Corner, we were fearful that some individuals might act against us, as there were accusations that we were involved in spying. This concern was reinforced by comments we received on social media following our program announcements. Many held the perception that Americans were acting against Ethiopia (Jimma Coordinator).

Especially at the epicenter of the conflict or the areas closer to the conflict, the mere presence of a staff member from the American Corner was enough to create unease and suspicion. In such areas local engagement declined due to the bad perception that these staff members represented a foreign power implicated in the conflict. This was particularly evident among youth, who often exhibited reluctance to participate in Corner activities despite their continued interest in learning. One informant noted that the prevailing belief in U.S. involvement in the conflict discouraged

many potential visitors from attending programs or engaging with the Corners, creating a significant barrier to outreach efforts. This example indicated how political narratives and mistrust can seriously affect the effectiveness of PD initiatives, even when the educational mission remained valued by the community.

The image of American Corners as politically neutral spaces dedicated to learning and cross-cultural dialogue was affected by the climate of suspicion. Even if not in a major way, connections with local stakeholders were impacted due to the misperception that Corners served political or intelligence-gathering purposes. Such perceptions also raised ethical and professional challenges against staff who were often placed in the difficult position of defending the non-political nature of their work while navigating narratives that portrayed PD efforts as foreign interference. This tried to blur the boundaries between soft power outreach and perceived political interference due to the rise in suspicion during the conflict. Hence, the credibility and effectiveness of American PD initiatives at the grassroots level appeared to be weakened due to that shift in perception. Trust was also eroded to some level and the continued presence of American Corners in affected regions became increasingly complicated.

At the height of the war, participants began raising questions regarding the United States' stance on the conflict. For instance, when the Bahir Dar American Corner sent bulk SMS messages, some recipients responded by inquiring about the U.S. position in the war. Similarly, during Zoom meetings, participants frequently asked, "What is the position of the U.S.?" Others used the chat feature to express concerns about various statements made by the U.S. government and sought clarifications from coordinators. Whenever there were significant developments in the conflict, many participants were eager to understand the official U.S. perspective, reflecting the heightened sensitivity and curiosity surrounding America's role during this turbulent period (Bahir Dar Corner Coordinator).

3.4. Resilience and positive perception of American Corners amid conflict

3.4.1. Absence of Physical Threats

During the conflict, there were no documented or reported physical attacks against any American Corner staff or the facilities regardless of the heightened political tension and public suspicion against Corner activities. This is particularly significant given the hostile narratives circulating about U.S. involvement in the conflict, which heightened risks for institutions associated with American diplomacy. But the conflict affected the staff in a different way by subjecting them to considerable psychological stress, resulting from media narratives, fears of surveillance, accusations of espionage, and to some extent community mistrust. But the absence of direct violence allowed many Corners to maintain operations, despite being under constrained circumstances. Especially regional areas like Jimma and Dire Dawa that were not directly affected by the conflict continued to function with minimal disruption to their safety and security. Again, the local context was highlighted here as Coordinators were able to sustain programming in these areas.

So, our program during that period was not interrupted at all. The issue was not with us. Although there was tension in the country, we continued running both online and in-person programs throughout that time. Our activities were not affected by the war. We carried on as usual, without any interruption or directive from the Embassy to pause or discontinue the programs. Attendance remained steady, and we had many participants as usual. Despite the national tension, our regular programs continued without disruption (Jimma Corner Coordinator).

3.4.2. Recognition of Non-Political Role

American Corners portrayed themselves as non-political and educational hubs despite the heightened political sensitivities and volatile environment during the northern conflict. Both staff and participants consistently emphasized that the programming maintained a clear non-political orientation, deliberately focusing on academic enrichment, practical skill development, and youth empowerment rather than engaging in contentious political discourse. Being neutral was not just a strategic choice but a core principle that guided the goal of American Corners throughout the crisis.

When you are operating in a host country from another country, as we said, American Spaces are for the community, for the public, and their objective is clearly defined. It's to engage the Ethiopian public. It's a positive people-to-people relationship, and no other politics is involved in it. So, maintaining that unique perspective always helps to sustain the Spaces, even during challenging times between the two countries (Director of American Spaces).

The American Corners provided safe spaces for learning and personal growth as they prioritize educational and cultural activities, including language courses, technology training, critical thinking workshops, and community dialogue forums. This focus helped to foster trust and goodwill within local communities, even as broader public narratives about U.S. involvement in the conflict became increasingly polarized. The local staff demonstrated professionalism and dedication as they successfully managed to maintain a positive public image despite widespread tensions and shifting perceptions. The staff navigated complex social dynamics with utmost sensitivity and care.

These are the kinds of spaces Ethiopia truly needs, because such spaces are very rare and not easily found everywhere. Especially for young people, these spaces offer valuable opportunities to gather, read, and engage with others. While many may have access to phones and some technology, not everyone has the resources or environment to fully develop their skills. American Spaces provide platforms where young people can discover their strengths and build on them. These centers serve as important hubs for growth, learning, and expanding horizons, making them essential for empowering the next generation (Visitor of the Satchmo American Center).

Youth generally viewed the Corners as valuable resources for empowerment and skill-building rather than as political entities. It is because of this commitment to neutrality by the Corners that played a crucial role in sustaining such engagements. In this way, American Corners served as vital platforms for soft power, promoting educational development and intercultural understanding even in the most challenging circumstances.

3.4.3. Positive Diplomatic Symbolism

A significant revelation of the research was that the American Corners represented almost the only positive link between the United States and Ethiopia during the period of conflict. They remained the sole mediums of engagement for both Ethiopia and the U.S. during that critical time of the conflict. They served as remaining vital conduits for cultural and educational diplomacy. The Corners consistently maintained that posture in a period marked by strained formal diplomatic relations. They provided enduring channels of engagement that persisted even as official interactions faced significant challenges. For the continuity of that connection, the role and dedication of the staff was critically important. The American Corners continued to avail virtual programming and courses without interruption regardless of the difficult circumstances, including the ordered departure of diplomatic personnel and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This unwavering commitment effectively positioned the Corners as a lifeline of U.S. diplomatic presence, maintaining connections with Ethiopian audiences when other forms of engagement were limited or unavailable. The Corners' uninterrupted operation and accessibility during strained bilateral relations increased the perception of the Corners as reliable, non-political spaces that nurtured ongoing dialogue, learning, and cultural exchanges. This enduring presence underscored the critical value of the Corners not just as educational institutions but also as important symbols of diplomatic continuity in a complex geopolitical context.

In general, the findings of this study revealed the difficult situations, including significant psychological and operational challenges for especially local staff as they tried to maintain PD operations. These PD platforms demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience in implementing their mission during the conflict. The war disrupted programs and forced the closure of Corners. There was loss of connectivity, and displacement of staff, particularly in high-conflict zones such as Mekelle and Bahir Dar. It was found out that the extent of disruption to American Corner operations varied depending on their proximity to conflict areas, with some Corners, like Mekelle, entirely suspending operations.

As a response to the challenges, Corner staff utilized a range of digital tools and platforms to sustain programming and ensure continued access to community services. This adaptation to

virtual modalities, such as Zoom and Telegram, allowed the Corners to remain functional and relevant, even in the face of physical and logistical constraints. Their capacity to adapt was further demonstrated through the introduction of new program formats and topics that focused on peacebuilding, media literacy, dis/misinformation, leadership, and other similar topics. Courses were strategically reoriented toward non-political, skill-building with focus on meeting community needs during crisis. Corners maintained engagement with the local populace through technological adaptations, with the digital pivot serving not only as a practical necessity but as an opportunity to broaden access. This is despite internet restrictions and the prohibition of public gatherings.

The findings of the research illustrated that institutions of soft power struggle to maintain neutrality amid the geopolitical narratives tied to their sponsoring nations or countries. The different challenges did not entirely stop American Corners from conducting PD programs. The Corners were often accepted as neutral and beneficial educational spaces in areas not affected by the conflict. Hence, to strengthen such positive perceptions, it is imperative to secure and maintain local public trust and appreciation for the works carried out at the Corners. As many of the key informants mentioned, the Corners represented the only sustained connection to the United States during the period challenged by diplomatic distress. The uninterrupted operation of the Corners, particularly in virtual formats, served as a form of soft diplomacy that retained symbolic value even as formal relations deteriorated. Such local engagements maintained the continued presence of the U.S. in a constructive and well-received manner. The approach also positioned the American Corners to function as lifelines of cultural and educational exchange.

In conclusion, what the findings revealed was that the practice of public diplomacy at American Corners during the northern conflict manifested the complexities of undertaking PD in conflict-affected situations. In their undertakings, these Corners tried to balance caution with creativity while maintaining neutrality, resilience, and mutual understanding through a well thought adaptations, contextual awareness, and technological innovation. Their sustained presence underscored the enduring relevance of grassroots cultural diplomacy in navigating uncertain situations.

CHAPTER 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF MAJOR FINDINGS

4.1. Impact of the Northern Conflict on American Corners' Operations

The northern conflict had a big impact on the public diplomacy programming at the American Corners in Ethiopia. The conflict subjected the Corners to multifaceted short-term challenges, such as internet connectivity disruptions, and long-term challenges such as Corner relocation to a new host. Events, activities and programming were impacted in various ways. The strained government to government bilateral relationship as well as the hostile media narratives negatively affected the operations of the American Corners at the time. Some local populace developed critical sentiments towards the U.S. government due to the media reporting and various government led protests against the U.S. and to some extent other major powers in relation to the war⁵. In terms of major hostile narratives by local state media and the federal government, Nathan (2022) mentioned the *No More* movement amplified by both local and Diaspora Ethiopians, especially targeting the U.S. According to Aro (2016), such information warfare by state media is most common and used to influence public opinion, attitudes and actions. Such a strategy is utilized to secure public support for political goals of the state's leaders.

The declaration of the state of emergency had impacted the in-person gathering for programming at the Corners. Beyond preventing the in-person visits to the Corners, the state of emergency created an environment of fear and trauma among especially the Bahir Dar Corner Coordinators. The suspension of in-person programming, especially in Mekelle and Bahir Dar, affected the quality of programming and the number of participants at these Corners. The situation was challenging both for physical safety and emotional wellbeing of the staff. This limitation forced the interruption or postponement of many PD initiatives. The frequency of events significantly decreased due to the instability especially in Bahir Dar. The Mekelle Corner entirely ceased operation and disconnected from digital platforms. Mekelle and Bahir Dar witnessed a prolonged disruption of digital connectivity including phone service outages which affected communication channels to the center.

⁵ [Ethiopians at pro-government rally criticize U.S. sanctions over Tigray conflict](#)
[Ethiopia rallies against US over Tigray restrictions | Africanews](#)

Barriers to the digital connections negatively impacted the outreach efforts of the Corners to the wider audiences. The digital disconnect affected both programming and correspondence with the center as well as other Corners hosting virtual events. One of the direct impacts of the conflict was apparently the strained bilateral relations between the U.S. and Ethiopia. This strained relation subsequently had a direct impact on operations in at least one of the Corners in Addis Ababa. It forced the American Corner located at the National Archives and Library Agency (NALA) to close and vacate the premises. After weighing some options for the relocation, the American Spaces administration moved the Corner to St. Mary's University⁶ near Mexico Square in Addis Ababa. The Mekelle Corner was closed as it was located at the epicenter of the war and this occurred well before issues emerged officially in the bilateral relations between the two countries.

The safety and security of the American Corner staff was also at stake, especially in Mekelle and Bahir Dar. The staff reported experiencing considerable stress. The prevalent atmosphere of fear and the association with a foreign institution increased the psychological strain among the Bahir Dar staff. Besides, some locals were suspicious about these individuals' connections to the American Corners and by extension to the U.S. Government. The situation was even severe and dangerous for the Mekelle staff who faced suspicion from both parties of the conflict. According to the informants from Mekelle, the Ethiopian government viewed the Mekelle staff as agents of the U.S. government, while Tigrayan forces questioned the inaction by the U.S. to immediately stop the war. The staff were left exposed, abandoned and unsupported. Some staff members said they concealed their Corner badges to avoid detection. The Mekelle American Corner staff had no contacts with the U.S. Embassy for the entire two-year duration of the conflict. Critical gaps in staff protection and institutional crisis response were exposed due to the conflict. Such a situation calls for a robust contingency planning and continued support systems for PD practitioners in volatile regions.

As the conflict escalated, the American staff left the country following an Ordered Departure. Security concerns were mentioned as the triggering factors for the Ordered Departure. Despite the absence of the American staff, the Corners maintained normal operations. The local staff

⁶ SMU houses Col John C. Robinson American Corner at its premises – St.Mary's University

were instrumental in sustaining the operations at the Corners. This situation highlighted both the vulnerability and the resilience of U.S. PD initiatives during crises. It also exposed the fragility of embassy-linked programming in conflict zones. The situation highlighted the strength of the relationships established between American Corners and their host communities. It called for sustained investment in local staff to ensuring the continuity of programs in the absence of the diplomatic corp. According to Wiseman (2019), public diplomacy instruments such as cultural, educational, scientific and other activities facilitate the relationship between hostile nations. Such relations at grassroots level are essential in facilitating normalization of relations between nations in strained bilateral relationships. These PD initiatives were also used to complement the direct government to government engagement. But it should be noted that PD initiatives cannot replace the vital role of formal diplomatic engagement between governments in handling crises and difficult security dilemmas.

4.2. Strategies for Sustaining Public Diplomacy during the Conflict

The American Corner staff had advance orientations regarding responses to emerging challenges. The staff were informed about crisis mitigation approaches ahead of time. Hence, advance preparation helped a lot in building staff confidence and maintaining operational stability during the conflict. This proactive approach allowed staff to navigate the challenges without panicking. Besides, there were some shifts in the regular PD practices. These included directing focus to some critical skill building and other social themes. In Bahir Dar, staff switched to regular phones to maintain correspondence with the center due to challenges with the digital connection. The escalating situation also necessitated a shift toward more controlled access to some facilities. Open promotions of events were also replaced by closed group invitations such as Telegram groups.

Technology helped Corners to move to virtual platforms for programming. Zoom, Google Meet and others helped the Corners to remain functional despite the suspension of in-person programming. The measures also illustrated how PD initiatives can be flexible and adapt to crisis conditions. The virtual programming was also seen as a positive development as it introduced new technologies to the public. It also actively engaged local youth in a range of skill building activities. However, virtual programs did not aid hands-on activities or trainings linked to

various technological tools. New courses were also introduced as part of maintaining operation at the Corners. Courses such as “Cat Park” were added to the menu to combat mis and disinformation. “Book Clubs” were also organized to promote reading, critical thinking and open dialogue.

Corner staff also deliberately minimized visibility for safety reasons and operational continuity. Controversial themes focusing on politics, religion, media, democracy were avoided to maintain neutrality and reduce the risk of negative repercussions. This form of self-censorship was vital for preserving the integrity of the Corners and ensuring the safety of both staff and visitors. By consciously avoiding potentially contentious subjects, American Corners managed to sustain their core educational and cultural missions without becoming entangled in politically sensitive issues. Efforts by the staff to create increased awareness on the core missions of the Corners also helped a lot in creating better understanding about the Corners and diffusing tensions.

4.3. Influence of U.S. Hard Power on Soft Power Practices at American Corners

Public accounts about the U.S. witnessed some transformation due to the increasingly critical media narratives against the U.S.⁷. The media portrayed the U.S. as an active party to the conflict. Such state-sponsored media narratives or communication is aimed at shaping the attitudes of citizens (Szostek, 2020). This government-led activity to influence foreign audience using media is also termed as “Information War”. The shift in public perception brought about by such deliberate tactics eroded trust and posed serious challenges to the implementation of U.S. public diplomacy initiatives. According to Wiseman (2018), media outlets including traditional and new media contribute greatly in promoting public diplomacy. It is not only an important venue for communication but to convey vital messages to the target population. As part of its critical goals, the media maintains its role of informing the public. Another constructive role of the media is in helping shape the beliefs and attitudes of the general public. As Nye (2021) emphasized, when actions in hard power department go against messaging in the soft power department, trust and credibility is very much affected.

⁷ [A rally protesting foreign meddling in internal affairs of Ethiopia held in Washington D.C. – Welcome to Fana Media Corporation S.C](#)
[U.S. Pronouncements on Ethiopia's Internal Affairs is Regrettable: Gov't - ENA English](#)

4.4. Resilience and Positive Perception of American Corners Amid Conflict

Despite the hardship, the staff or Corner facilities faced no physical threats or attacks. Due to the neutrality of the programs, the Corners were seen by the locals as non-political settings, dedicated to educate and inform local visitors. The Corners provided safe spaces for learning and personal growth of the youth. Courses offered at the Corners included language courses, technology, educational and cultural presentations and exchanges, dialogue forums and the like. By creating a welcoming environment, the staff also demonstrated professionalism and effectively managed challenging situations. Overall, the Corners remained as the only linkages between the U.S. and Ethiopia during the war period. Corners in Jimma and Dire Dawa were operating normally since they were not directly impacted by the conflict. In summary, the complexities in carrying out PD activities were manifested during northern conflict. Performing PD activities in conflict-impacted situations proved challenging, yet possible. These difficulties could be mitigated and effectively managed using some well-crafted strategies. The Corners tried to balance caution with innovative ideas and maintained neutrality. Adaptations to operations, contextual awareness, and technological innovation are essential in sustaining PD activities during times of stress in the bilateral relationships.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

This research explored the strategies the American Corners employed to navigate through waves of challenges stemming from the conflict in the northern part of Ethiopia. The pros and cons of the conflict on the overall operations of the Corners were examined while the specific linkages between the different faces of diplomacy – soft and hard – were investigated. The findings highlighted the multifaceted challenges the American Corners were subjected to and the extent to which these soft power instruments were tested. These platforms of U.S. public diplomacy professionally maneuvered through and adapted situations and maintained their relevance through the principles of soft power: relationship building, attraction, and cultural engagement. Despite the disruptions highlighting the structural vulnerabilities of PD efforts, the quick adaptations to the crisis situation reinforced the value of flexibility, local trust, and conflict sensitivity in sustaining PD in a period of instability.

These Spaces, typically perceived as neutral, had their neutrality undermined and their soft power potential constrained due to proliferation of anti-U.S. narratives. The Spaces' allegiance with the U.S. government during that specific period was the other reason that rendered them susceptible to shifting public perceptions. Due to the negative rhetoric, some of these venues were perceived as politically charged and to some extent lost their credibility. The other major challenge was suspicion directed at Corner staff. Winning the trust of the local public and adapting to the local dynamics are critical for the Corners to remain relevant in the face of challenges. The tensions during the northern conflict indicated the vulnerability of these educational and cultural centers to perceived politicization and suspicion. However, the Corners maintained a degree of credibility due to their conflict-sensitive programming and agility to the changing situation. Therefore, future PD initiatives implemented in conflict zones should be informed of local situations and ensure flexibility in their undertakings.

Besides, the continued relevance of the Corners during that turbulent period was due to the commitment, flexibility and ingenuity of the local staff. The staff demonstrated remarkable strength by independently hosting programs without waiting for much direct oversight. There

was limited support from the American supervisors but the staff in each of the Corners creatively adapted to the crisis. They introduced new, locally relevant courses, hosting virtual programs, and carefully avoiding politically sensitive topics to protect and maintain the neutrality of the Corners. Through this way, the local staff preserved the reliability of these spaces, and helped in keeping the Corners open and engaged with communities. The staff performed their duties despite risks to their own safety and security. This extraordinary dedication was carried out with minimal recognition or support. Moving forward, greater investment in the wellbeing of local staff is important, including, but not limited to, increased compensation, regular training, psychosocial support, and formal recognition of their frontline role in maintaining U.S. public diplomacy under crisis conditions. Their resilience highlighted the indispensable role of locally engaged staff in sustaining soft power platforms when formal diplomatic channels were constrained.

The individual resilience and most importantly the collaborative spirit among the local staff of the Corners played a big role in maintaining Corner functions during the conflict. The staff handled some questions from the public on politically sensitive topics with utmost professionalism and non-partisan approach. They supported each other professionally, technically, and emotionally as they created a sense of solidarity that helped them navigate the uncertainty and stress of the period. The welcoming atmosphere by the Corner staff also helped in increased engagement by the visitors.

5.2. Implications for Policy and Research

The findings of the research indicated that PD practices need some conflict-sensitive approaches. This can be taken as one of the important lessons. PD activities, especially in volatile political situations like the northern conflict must be crafted with more flexibility and adaptability in mind. The potential deterioration of situations needs to be considered in devising strategies and implementers need to be anticipating and preparing for such events. Safety protocols must be called into action in protecting personnel as well as facilities where PD activities are implemented. Caution must be taken while crafting messages not to further fuel tensions. Decisions by leaders must take note of sensitivities and risks.

American Spaces operate most efficiently in an environment in which the local public considers them as neutral, non-political and beneficial to them. However, their credibility might be compromised when these PD activities are conflated with the broader actions or objectives of the hard power politics. There should be a clear distinction in terms of branding and local engagement strategy. This might need some reevaluation of these PD Centers to ensure their complete separation or disassociation with the controversial coercive foreign policy initiatives. Another major implication was institutional support systems for the local staff. This needs to be strengthened. The staff faced a lot of challenges, including physical, emotional and other strains without proper recognition, adequate protection and support. In the future, there should be more robust crisis communication, compensations, psychological and mental health support and acknowledgment of the key roles.

5.3. Specific Recommendations

Advance preparation and proactive measures were critical in maintaining the functions of the American Corners in times of crisis. Preparatory activities can involve crafting contingency plans for some possible disruptions. It can be programming disruption, staff safety, protection or other kinds of preparation. Depending on connectivity, virtual tools should be available to ensure continuity of programming. Strong connections should also be established with the local public.

The staff should be familiar with decentralized activities and programs in order to be self-sufficient during times of pressure. Digital programming requires infrastructure which is resilient during crisis. Maintaining digital communication tools should also be part of the preparation in anticipation of possible challenges. Maintaining neutrality in content development and public messaging is essential with more focus on programming themes that address the needs of the local community. Impartiality helps in securing the trust of the local audience who in turn will develop a sense of ownership for the facilities and assist in their wellbeing and protection endeavors. Consistent messaging on the non-political nature of the Corners, events and programs is also another essential undertaking. This helps in avoiding rumors or misperceptions about the Corners. There should be a system to gather views and individual opinions of the public and/or visitors regarding their experiences at the Corners. Monitoring and evaluation systems can also help gauge the sentiment of the local people towards the Corners and Corner activities. It is also

ideal to establish some form of partnerships with local institutions, including universities, civic groups, cultural organizations, and others. Partnerships and collaborations with the local people and entities is an essential help during times of crisis.

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APPENDICES

Data Collection Tool

Respondent Information Sheet

Title: A Study of the Practice of Public Diplomacy at American Corners in Ethiopia Amid Diplomatic Tensions During the Northern Conflict

Participants: American Corner Visitors, Coordinators & American Officers

Investigator: Yohannes Gezahegn (**Phone:** 0911512227, **Email:** yohannesyg1@gmail.com)

Information sheet

Introduction: Greetings! My name is Yohannes Gezahegn. I am a student at the Political Science and International Relations (PSIR) Department of the Addis Ababa University (AAU). I am conducting interviews with coordinators, senior leadership and purposely selected visitors of the American corners in Ethiopia to inquire about their experiences at the Corners during the northern conflict.

Purpose of the research

The purpose of the study is to investigate the practice of public diplomacy at American Corners in Ethiopia amid diplomatic tensions during the northern conflict. Based on the findings, the study will identify ways of sustaining public diplomacy practices during periods of diplomatic tensions.

Procedure

You are selected purposefully for this interview. I will ask you a few questions concerning your experiences and practices at the American Corners during the northern conflict. The discussion will take maximum one hour. Participation is voluntary and you can skip any question that creates discomfort for you or stop the discussion at any time. However, your active participation and genuine responses have paramount importance in understanding the practice of public diplomacy at the American Corners during the northern conflict.

Risks and discomfort

There are no risks involved due to your participation in the discussion process. The discussion may take some of your time and interfere with your daily routine. However, I will try to make it as brief as possible.

Benefits

There will be no direct benefit to you; but the information you provide will help in identifying the practices employed at the American Corners to sustain operations during the northern conflict.

Confidentiality

The information that I collect in this study will be kept confidential. Your name will not be written in this form and the information I collect from you will not be shown to anyone outside of this researcher.

By signing below, you confirm that you:

1. Have read and understood the purpose, procedures, and your rights as a participant.
2. Agree to participate in the interview
3. Understand that you can withdraw at any time without consequence.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

If you have any questions or concerns about this survey, please contact the researchers at Yohannes Gezahegn; yohannesyg1@gmail.com; 0911512227

Interview guide

Thank you for consenting to participate in this interview. I will now begin the question-and-answer session. Please note that the interview will be recorded.

1. How regularly were you visiting the American Corner? Tell me about your experience at the American Corner.
2. Were the American Corners operational during the period of the northern conflict? Please give me details on the status of all the Corners during this period.
3. How did the northern conflict affect the operation of the American Corner?
4. What strategies were employed to maintain engagement with the local Ethiopian audience during the conflict?
5. What challenges did staff face in sustaining public diplomacy efforts during this time? (Before, during and after the conflict)
6. How did American Corners address potential perceptions of bias during the conflict?
7. Were there specific programs or initiatives adapted in response to the diplomatic tensions between Ethiopia and the U.S. during this period?
8. What role, if any, did technology or virtual platforms play in continuing activities at American Corners?
9. We have discussed the various challenges and successes throughout this period. Considering these factors, how would you assess the overall operation of American Corners in Ethiopia during the conflict period?
10. What lessons were learned that could strengthen public diplomacy in similar future scenarios?