

PERSIAN GULF HEGEMONY IN THE HORN OF AFRICA: PATRONAGE, ARMS TRADE, AND EVOLVING POWER DYNAMICS

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March 2024



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iii. Acronyms

TRSF:	Rapid Support Forces
SAF:	Sudan Armed Forces
AU:	African Union
IGAD:	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
GCC:	Gulf Cooperation Council
ATMIS:	African Union Transition Mission in Somalia
AMISOM:	African Union Mission to Somalia
TDF:	Tigray Defense Force
TPLF:	Tigray People's Liberation Front
BRI:	Belt and Road Initiative
FTZ:	African Free Trade Zone
ENDF:	Ethiopian National Defense Force
OCHA:	The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
TMC:	Sudan's Transitional Military Council
TSC:	Sudan's Transitional Sovereignty Council
UNSC:	United Nations Security Council
EAC:	East African Community

1. Introduction

Characterized by heightened conflict and intensified competition for power among Persian Gulf powers, the Horn of Africa finds itself in a profoundly vulnerable state. The peace between the Ethiopian federal government and Tigray hangs by a thread, whilst insurgencies in Amhara and Oromia threaten state collapse. Somalia continues to grapple with the threat posed by al-Shabaab, as President Hassan Sheikh Mohamed's efforts to contain the group have shown limited effectiveness. The deadly conflict in Sudan between the RSF and SAF is approaching its one-year anniversary, showing no signs of abating. Mogadishu and Addis Ababa find themselves at a potentially violent junction, as a result of the contentious Ethiopia-Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

The fragility of institutions and economies in the Horn of Africa creates an environment conducive to proxy conflict, patronage, and clientelism. Increasingly, these vulnerabilities are being exploited by sovereign actors from the Persian Gulf, who have come to wield disproportionate power in contrast to their Horn counterparts. The historical characterization of Persian Gulf states' presence in the region as 'soft power' has shifted towards a more asymmetric power balance, profoundly undermining peace and stability.¹

The historical ties between the Gulf region and the Horn of Africa date back to as early as the 7th century

hijrah. Islam was introduced to the Horn through Yemen, with the construction of the first Mosque on the African continent in Ethiopia around 615 CE.² Rich in natural resource deposits, the horn has historically been a conduit for trade and cultural exchanges between the African continent and the Arabian Peninsula. This significance persists into the 21st century amidst heightened geopolitical competition in the Horn within an evolving multipolar landscape, wherein realpolitik strategies have taken advantage of the impotence of multilateral actors, thereby creating a security vacuum and undermining the so-called 'rules-based order.'

The involvement of Persian Gulf sovereign actors in the Horn in recent years has evolved into a delicate interplay of alliances forged through commercial investments and security collaborations. This engagement exhibits characteristics of neo-imperialism, as Gulf actors wield disproportionate commercial and diplomatic influence, whilst juggling the complexities of intra-Gulf competition and power dynamics. The UAE holds a significant and pervasive influence in the Horn—pronounced in Ethiopia, Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia, and Somaliland—to the extent that a former official from the Trump administration remarked, 'you turn over any rock in the Horn of Africa, and you find the UAE there.'³ Recent discoveries of the Emirati role in financing the RSF's campaign in Sudan have prompted broader discussions regarding the ambitions of actors

1 S Gaid, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, November 2022

2 J S Trimmingham, 2007; p.44

3 P Iddon, *The New Arab*, September 2019

situated on the eastern side of the Arabian Peninsula, with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran emerging as party to the evolving discourse.⁴

The short-lived nature and catastrophic disintegration of the Saudi and UAE-facilitated Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement points to the shortcomings and ineffectiveness of Gulf efforts in terms of peace-building, and points to an erosion of international norms, wherein military solutions have replaced political solutions as the first point of call. The absence of assertive mediators capable of engaging with the conflicting parties through diplomatic means has seen peace agreements fall 'out of vogue,'⁵ whilst mediation efforts have often bypassed multilateral actors such as the AU and IGAD.

Disentangling the contemporary geopolitics and economics of the Persian Gulf's Horn presence is crucial for an effective address of the region's complex political ailments. This analysis delves into the Machiavellian nature of the Persian Gulf presence, encompassing its origins, current activities, and evolution. First, it endeavors to trace the trajectory from cooperative, soft power arrangements to an approach more aligned with John Mearsheimer's offensive realist theoretical doctrine, which posits power maximization and expansionism.⁶ Secondly, it explores how this evolution is intertwined with a theoretical consensus, suggesting a shift toward an amorphous regional

order, wherein rules and outcomes are ambiguous. Thirdly, it explores the Gulf's involvement in incumbent crises, and measures how unfolding developments have shaped the Gulf's ambitions to play a more prominent role in the Horn's affairs. The GCC states—driven by the global financial crisis of 2007-2008—have sought to strengthen their economic ties with Africa.⁷ Iran, despite not being a member of the GCC bloc, has also pursued similar strategies. Finally, this study aims to offer pathways for Horn-based multilateral and unilateral actors regarding their engagement with Persian Gulf entities, aiming to navigate the inherent asymmetries within this relationship.

⁴ J Fenton-Harvey, *World Politics Review*, January 2024

⁵ M Mutiga & R Atwood, *International Crisis Group*, Feb. 3, 2024

⁶ J S Nye, *Public Affairs*, 2009

⁷ W Todman, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, November 2018

2. Theoretical Analysis

The methodological approach of this study began with a review of theoretical literature pertaining to 'state power,' in order to build a foundational premise of understanding the nature of the Persian Gulf presence in the Horn. After a theoretical analysis, empirical research from non-state institutions and think tanks— in addition to personal consultations with Horn-based policymakers, journalists, and professionals involved in multilateral initiatives— provided the qualitative backdrop to understanding the presence of the Persian Gulf in the Horn.

Soft Power vs Offensive Realism

In international relations, power tends to be assessed predominantly through easily quantifiable 'hard' metrics, oriented around military capability and economic strength. Hard power, characterized by coercion and the use of force, economic sanctions, or incentives, relies on a combination of threats and rewards to achieve objectives. In contrast, soft power operates through the cultivation of positive attraction and persuasion. Instead of employing coercive tactics, it seeks to influence others by building networks, crafting persuasive narratives, shaping international norms, and harnessing a nation's inherent appeal. This approach eschews the traditional reliance on incentive/threat strategies, opting instead for a strategy grounded in building relationships and fostering goodwill on the global stage.

Samira Gaid's 2022 analysis examining Persian Gulf soft power initiatives in the Horn of Africa serves as a foundational framework for understanding the evolving nature of the Gulf presence in the region. Gaid contends that the influence of Gulf States' soft power endeavors has, more or less, empowered Horn states to advance their strategic objectives. Subsequent analysis indicates a shift toward *realpolitik*, defined by pragmatic foreign policy at the expense of what conventional wisdom frames as 'moral.' Utilizing qualitative analytical methods, this study reveals that the once predominantly soft power presence has determinably transitioned into a presence better explained by the principles of offensive realist theory.

In his 1990 book *'Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power,'* Joseph Nye coined the term 'soft power,' referring to the process through which culture, political ideals, and policies, when communicated effectively, can influence the decisions of other states without resorting to overt military force or economic coercion.⁸ Thus, soft power represents the capacity to entice other actors to reshape their perceptions and interpretations of their interests, steering them towards a shared understanding of what should be prioritized, without resorting to force. Nye outlined three fundamental components of soft power: political values, culture, and foreign policy.

⁸ S Gaid, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, November 2022; p.5

Within each of these categories, there exists a diverse array of individual sources that contribute to the overall soft power of a nation.⁹ Gaid references soft power indices compiled by McClory (2019) and *the Global Soft Power Index* (2021) to help define the concept. McClory utilizes metrics such as government, education, culture, technology, and foreign policy to rank the top 30 sovereign entities perceived as key facilitators of soft power.¹⁰ *The Global Soft Power Index* categorizes the top 100 nations based on seven pillars of soft power; business and trade, governance, international relations, culture and heritage, media and communication, education and science, and people and values. The 2021 index positions Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar within the top 50, while Iran is ranked slightly lower.¹¹

According to Mearsheimer's conception of offensive realism, the inherent anarchic structure of the international system fosters aggressive behavior among states in global politics.¹² This theory diverges from defensive realism by portraying major powers as revisionist actors driven by the pursuit of maximizing power, as instead of prioritizing balancing strategies, these states seek to assert dominance in the international arena through strategies like 'buck-passing' and self-promotion. Offensive realism posits five key tenets: Firstly, it emphasizes the significance of great powers as primary actors in global affairs within an anarchical

⁹ J S Nye, *Public Affairs*, 2009

¹⁰ J McClory, *USC Center on Public Diplomacy*, 2019

¹¹ *Global Soft Power Index*, 2021

¹² P Toft, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, December 2005

international system. Secondly, it asserts that all states inherently possess offensive military capabilities. Thirdly, it highlights the perpetual uncertainty surrounding the intentions of other states. Fourthly, offensive realism underscores the primary objective of states to ensure their survival in the international arena. Finally, it claims that states are rational actors capable of formulating strategic approaches aimed at maximizing their chances of survival.¹³

Soft power and offensive realism are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but rather complementary dimensions of a state's unilateral grand strategy. States may incorporate elements of both soft power and offensive realist strategies into their foreign policy approaches, with these strategies existing along a continuum of diplomatic tactics. While these theoretical perspectives differ in their underlying principles, states have the flexibility to integrate aspects of both into their foreign policy approaches. In the context of Gulf actors' engagement in the Horn, the discernible trend towards the increased utilization of the offensive realist paradigm is evidenced by various degrees of involvement in financing civil conflicts, intervening in internal affairs, and striving for hegemony or dominance over rival states.

'A Rules-Based Order'

Since the advent of the Obama administration, the United States' approach to the Horn has been characterized by a lack of decisiveness and assertiveness. This change is evident in its engagement with

¹³ J Mearsheimer, 2005

Sudan, where it has failed to issue comprehensive calls for a ceasefire and has obstructed other initiatives aimed at advancing multilaterally-led peace agreements, concurrently failing to meaningfully pursue unilaterally led peacebuilding efforts. Despite having the capability to mediate and facilitate talks as needed, the US has adopted a passive stance and— notwithstanding the issues associated with Washington assuming the role as the world ‘police’— there existed clear and defined rules, which the actors in the Horn understood and could profit from by adhering to.¹⁴ The absence of a strong US presence has created something of a power vacuum, weakening the presence of well-meaning multilateral bodies— with both the AU and IGAD¹⁵ struggling with internal coherence to adequately respond— thus contributing to an increasingly anarchic regional arena. *International Crisis Group’s Africa* Director Murithi Mutiga acknowledged that whilst the regional ‘wars of choice’ have certainly been the responsibility of local actors, the US absence has exacerbated situations, especially as its mediation efforts have been half-hearted.¹⁶

The withdrawal of global powers and the vacuum of assertive leadership from actors capable of convening to address instability has reshaped the Horn’s regional order. Violence has become a default approach for regional actors,¹⁷ with the pursuit and consolidation of power— rather than

negotiation for peaceful solutions— serving as the region’s defining *modus operandi*. With the erosion of the rules-based order, paramilitaries are now able to challenge national militaries, and the preference for military solutions over political ones is being reinforced by external actors without significant consequences. The resulting power vacuum has not gone unnoticed in the Persian Gulf, where actors stand ready to identify and exploit proxies among groups willing to accept patronage.¹⁸

The crises in Tigray and Sudan reflect the inflection points, signaling a shift toward what can be considered the ‘new normal’ in the Horn.¹⁹ While Ethiopia has managed to avoid a state collapse similar to that of Sudan, both conflicts have been characterized by rampant impunity, creating an environment where the involved actors have noticed the reduced stakes of conflict. In an interview with *International Crisis Group*, Kholood Khair noted that the concept of ‘responsibility to protect’²⁰ has become something of a historical footnote in the current landscape. Ethnicities across borders are being politically manipulated by various regimes, marked by a distinct lack of restraint.²¹

¹⁴ M Mutiga & R Atwood, *International Crisis Group*, Feb. 3, 2024

¹⁵ M Ewi, *Premium Times*, January 3, 2024

¹⁶ M Mutiga & R Atwood, *International Crisis Group*, Feb. 3, 2024

¹⁷ A Rondos, *International Crisis Group*, December 2023

¹⁸ *Ibid*, December 202

¹⁹ K Khair, *International Crisis Group*, December 2023

²⁰ *Ibid*, December 2023

²¹ A Rondos, *International Crisis Group*, December 2023

3. *The Horn's incumbent crises*

The Horn of Africa is currently contending with crises in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia, in addition to crises between states— primarily as a result of the Somaliland-Ethiopia MoU— which heightens its vulnerability to proxy conflicts and external interference. Moreover, within the next two years, elections are slated to take place in Somaliland, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and South Sudan. Election periods are particularly delicate for Horn states, as they provide external actors with windows to facilitate clientelist or patronage networks.

Sudan

Initially a camel herder, Hamdan Dagalo 'Hemedti' climbed Sudan's military ranks, eventually becoming indispensable to President Omar al-Bashir as head of the Janjaweed, a praetorian guard that gained notoriety for its countless violations of international humanitarian law in Darfur. In 2020, Alex De Waal characterized Hemedti as 'one of the richest men in Sudan,'²² securing his stake in complex patronage networks, clandestine security arrangements, and political favors.

Despite al-Bashir's 'coup-proofed' regime, Hemedti played a pivotal role in the removal of the President, collaborating closely with his eventual belligerent— Abdel Fattah al-Burhan— the head of the Sudanese Armed Forces. Al-Burhan and Hemedti subsequently violated agreements of the Transitional Sovereignty Council

²² A De Waal, *BBC News*, July 2019

(TSC), the successor of the Transitional Military Council (TMC), interfering with the democratic political track and ultimately forcing Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok to resign. This effectively elevated al-Burhan to de facto head of state,²³ which led to another round of protests in late 2022, culminating in the TSC promising another civilian government by April 2023. Displeased with playing second fiddle to al-Burhan and resigned to follow through with a proposed merger of the RSF with the SAF, Hemedti mobilized his paramilitary against al-Burhan in Khartoum on April 15, 2023, and has since sustained the conflict through leverage of his wealth accumulated from his control over Darfuri resource deposits, in addition to substantial commercial ties with the UAE.

The Sudanese state collapsed in April 2023, with the conflict a culmination of unresolved issues concerning resource access, political identity, and state institutional composition.²⁴ In a region marked by instability, the scale of warfare witnessed in Sudan is unprecedented, with Khartoum (traditionally a sanctuary for refugees fleeing conflict in other parts of the region) the first to fall, as the state's bureaucrats fled en masse. Not since the early 1990s, when Somalia's national army was dismantled, has there been such a thorough disintegration of a country's military and civil structures and intellectual elite, leaving behind a

²³ *BBC News*, January 2022

²⁴ UN Security Council Report, January 1, 2024

void that will take decades to fill.

It has inflicted a devastating death toll of over 12,000 people, in addition to 5.1 million displaced and 18 million at risk of starvation. In Darfur, a second genocide is taking place.²⁵ In December 2023, Wad Madani– the capital of El Gezira state and OCHA's hub for humanitarian operations since the outbreak of war– fell to the RSF after a four-day battle with the SAF.²⁶ Diplomatic efforts are urgently needed to address the crisis and pave the way for reconstruction.²⁷

Ethiopia and Somaliland

The Somaliland-Ethiopia Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is an agreement signed on January 1, 2024, that grants Ethiopia a 12-mile coastal territory on a fifty-year lease for military purposes and commercial utilization of Somaliland's Berbera port. In return, Somaliland supposedly receives diplomatic recognition and stakes in Ethiopian Airlines. Mogadishu and the Arab League of states– of which Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE are all members– see the MoU as a flagrant violation of international demarcation laws and territorial sovereignty, presenting a complex juncture for the relationship between the Persian Gulf and the Horn's traditional heavyweight, Ethiopia.

Somaliland elections are scheduled for November, although the discord provoked by the MoU positions President Muse Bihi Abdi to prolong his

²⁵ A De Waal & A Mohammed, *New York Times*, December 4, 2023

²⁶ *Radio Dabanga*, December 19, 2023

²⁷ M Mutiga & R Atwood, *International Crisis Group*, Feb. 3, 2024

term through constitutional loopholes.

The deadliest armed conflict of the twenty-first century thus far is not the ongoing crises in Gaza or Ukraine, but rather the catastrophic civil war in Ethiopia, which concluded in November 2022.²⁸ With up to 800,000 people killed by fighting and famine, the Tigray war apportioned a devastating humanitarian and economic burden, transforming Ethiopia from one of Africa's more stable and rapidly developing economies into a state of stagnation.

Weighed down by the costs of war, the COVID-19 pandemic, and billions of dollars in debt, Ethiopia's economy continues its downward spiral. Defaulting on a \$33 million Eurobond payment in 2023 will halt further borrowing for the time being, whilst it is also precariously close to a default on \$7.7 billion borrowed from foreign governments, most of that to China. It also owes \$5.2 billion to private creditors– including \$3.2 billion to commercial banks²⁹– and has burnt through its foreign currency reserves, which has seen the value of the Ethiopian Birr plummet. Insurgencies in Oromia and Amhara regions have cost the Federal government a fortune, slowing domestic production and repelling foreign investment.

Somalia

Somalia faces significant challenges in its efforts to contain Al-Shabaab, with the campaign stagnating after initial progress under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud. The African Union

²⁸ A De Waal & M Gebrehiwot Berhe, *Foreign Affairs*, April 2024

²⁹ *Africa Defence Forum*, January 16, 2024

Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS)—which has provided crucial support in this campaign—is scheduled to withdraw in December 2024, prompting unanswered questions about a successor force,³⁰ future funding, and long-term sustainability. Complicating matters further, Ethiopia—a major contributor to ATMIS—has implicitly threatened Mogadishu through its MoU with Somaliland.

In February 2024, Mogadishu and Ankara inked a commercial and defense pact, granting Turkish forces authorization to operate within Somali airspace and territorial waters. Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamed cited the agreement's main objective as deterring threats to fisheries and combating piracy in Somali waters. However, its significance is also implicitly tied to the Ethiopia-Somaliland MoU. It will evolve through various commercial and military protocols over the course of ten years, wherein Türkiye will aid in the development of port facilities and vessels to tap into marine resources, in addition to assisting Mogadishu in establishing its own navy and training of military personnel. Türkiye will receive 30% of Somalia's maritime revenues and gain authorization to sell weapons to Somalia, ostensibly serving as a Somali deterrent against Ethiopia, which is indicative of the escalating regional power competition.

Eritrea

In an October speech, Prime Minister Abiy articulated Ethiopia's historical and practical rationale for claiming sea access, citing the

³⁰ *International Crisis Group*, February 14, 2024

economic, demographic, and security vulnerabilities imposed by its landlocked status on its vast population of 120 million. From 1952 to 1993, Eritrea and its Red Sea ports were integral parts of Ethiopia until a protracted national liberation struggle resulted in Eritrean statehood. Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki is concerned by Ethiopia's motivation for port access, given its irredentist undertone rooted in historical narratives. *The United States Institute for Peace* wrote in December 2023 that 'Although much of the Ethiopia body politic has moved on from the Eritrea question, there is a current of Ethiopian nationalist thought that regards Eritrea's departure—which made Ethiopia the most-populous landlocked country in the world by a considerable margin—a historic error.'³¹

PM Abiy's sea-access rhetoric, in addition to the breakdown of the 2018 bilateral rapport heightened tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia toward the end of 2023, has fuelled fears of renewed conflict between the two states, which neither side can afford. Even outcomes falling short of direct hostilities—such as a return to the 'no war, no peace' situation of preceding decades—would be devastating for both nations and the broader region.³²

Djibouti

Djibouti has found PM Abiy's pursuit of a seaport profoundly disconcerting, as it heavily relies on revenues generated from Ethiopia's commercial use of its seaport services. Djibouti's recent investments in road infrastructure

³¹ M Woldemariam, *United States Institute of Peace*, December 15, 2023

³² M Kheir Omer, *Foreign Policy*, November 7, 2023

linking its port to Ethiopia– financed through substantial Chinese loans– are now jeopardized by Ethiopia’s shift towards collaboration with a different economic partner. Djibouti’s President Ismail Omar Guelleh, the so-called ‘Grandfather’ of Somali politics, attempted unsuccessfully to mediate between Somalia and Somaliland. This move, as noted by *International Crisis Group*, may have been interpreted as an affront, exacerbating tensions in the region.³³

33 *International Crisis Group*, March 6, 2024

4. *The Persian Gulf's engagement with the Horn*

The Horn of Africa is a region between orders, and for this reason, it is the object of an array of Persian Gulf interests. Fragile states often attract opportunistic foreign involvement, and the involvement of Gulf states can be interpreted as a form of expansionist neo-colonial ambitions, motivated by the promise of new markets and economic opportunities.³⁴ The geographical proximity between the regions underscores their interconnectedness, as events on the Eastern side of the Arabian peninsula invariably impact the Red Sea's littoral states.³⁵

The interconnectedness between the Gulf and the Horn is also reflected by the presence of African diaspora communities in the Gulf region. In 2015, the United Nations estimated that approximately 540,000 Sudanese resided in GCC states, constituting roughly a third of the entire Sudanese diaspora.³⁶ Additionally, Saudi Arabia was reported to host around half a million Ethiopians and 100,000 Eritreans, whilst over 100,000 Ethiopians are employed in the UAE.³⁷ These figures are expected to have significantly increased following the Tigray War of 2020-2022, and amidst the ongoing conflict in Sudan.

Gulf states seek to assert their influence

³⁴ K Khair, *International Crisis Group*, December 2023

³⁵ S Gaid, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, November 2022; p.6

³⁶ M Valenta & J Jakobsen, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 2018

³⁷ W Todman, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, November 2018

and reshape the regional order, capitalizing on the declining interest of the United States in the region.³⁸ As the state of affairs in the Horn continues to deteriorate, the divergent understandings and expectations between Horn actors and Gulf states become increasingly pronounced.

With nearly 15% of global trade passing through the Bab el-Mandeb strait, its critical geoeconomic significance is underscored by the US and UK air strikes in Yemen as a response to Houthi attacks on ships beginning in late 2023. In an interview with *International Crisis Group*, the *US Institute of Peace's* Alexander Rondos said that the Red Sea is 'A euphemism for what is an unbalanced relationship between the western and eastern sides of the Red Sea, a place of perennial turmoil, profoundly unpredictable.'³⁹

The geostrategic significance of the Horn of Africa has seen it subjected to geopolitical competition amongst Persian Gulf states, who have engaged in contentious rivalries that have culminated in 'the securitization of the Horn... [and] races to invest in military facilities and logistical hubs.'⁴⁰ The intensification of competition amongst GCC states can be attributed to Iran's growing influence in the region, whilst Doha's collaboration with Ankara and the Muslim Brotherhood has

³⁸ S Gaid, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, November 2022; p.7

³⁹ A Rondos, *International Crisis Group*, December 2023

⁴⁰ N J Melvin, *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, April 2019

further complicated these dynamics, prompting Saudi Arabia and the UAE to seek ways to counteract the presence of both Qatar and Iran.⁴¹

By forging economic partnerships in Africa, Persian Gulf states have enhanced domestic food security and cultivated an image as benevolent Muslim benefactors. In 2016, the UAE surpassed Saudi Arabia to emerge as the GCC's largest investor in Africa, with an estimated \$11 billion in capital investments, ranking second globally only behind China.⁴² Given Gulf companies' proficiency in the energy sector, they have become particularly attractive partners for African nations seeking to develop their energy industries. Saudi Arabia's recent pledge of a \$10 billion investment in South Africa's energy sector underscores this trend.⁴³ Furthermore, the Gulf's capability to undertake large-scale infrastructure projects resonates strongly with rapidly developing African countries, further enhancing their appeal as commercial partners.⁴⁴

Since Gaid's report, Gulf actors have assumed a more assertive stance, bolstering their military foothold through the establishment of a proliferation of bases to enable intensified military collaboration with the Horn's sovereign actors.⁴⁵

The UAE

Leveraging its resource wealth and

regional influence, the UAE has emerged as a key participant in fostering regional integration within the Horn of Africa. The UAE's efforts have been focused on diversifying its economy away from reliance on oil by establishing itself as a global financial hub,⁴⁶ achieving this through the implementation of business-friendly regulatory frameworks, such as free trade zones, favorable tax regulations, and streamlined bureaucracy. A priority of the UAE's strategy has been countering Iran's influence in the region—particularly in Sudan—tacitly stifling emerging democracies⁴⁷ through checkbook diplomacy and arms sales.⁴⁸

The proxy dimension of the Sudanese conflict has become increasingly significant, as a decisive military victory for either side remains elusive. The UAE has cultivated relations with the RSF—ensuring a stake in profits yielded from Darfur⁴⁹—which has drawn in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, both of which support al-Burhan's SAF.⁵⁰

In November 2023, General Yasser al-Atta, Assistant Commander-in-Chief of the Sudan Armed Forces and a member of the Sudanese Sovereignty Council, openly criticized the UAE during a speech in Omdurman to members of the General Intelligence

41 J Mosley, June 2021

42 Dubai Chamber of Commerce, October 28, 2017

43 T Heiberg, *Reuters*, July 12, 2018

44 W Todman, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, November 2018

45 W Todman, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, November 2018

46 S Gaid, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, November 2022; p.9

47 A Halakhe, via *Middle East Eye*, January 25, 2024

48 E Soubrier, J Morit, & C Freer, *International Affairs*, July 2021

49 J Meester, W van den Berg, & H Verhoeven, Riyal Politik, *Netherlands Institute for International Relations*, April 2018

50 J Fenton-Harvey, *World Politics Review*, January 2024

Service, expressing, "We have received intelligence from both military and diplomatic sources, indicating that the UAE dispatches aircraft to provide support to the [RSF]."⁵¹ In January 2024, *Middle East Eye* reported that the UAE has been prolonging the conflict in Sudan by facilitating munition supply lines originating from various air strips in Libya, Chad, and Uganda, which was later corroborated by a UN report.⁵² Evidence gathered from an airstrip video, eyewitness testimonies, and data from flight trackers Flightradar24 and JetPhotos indicate that the aircraft observed at Hamrat al-Sheikh was a white Beechcraft 1900D, under Abu Dhabi's coordination.⁵³

In an interview with *MEE*, Former CIA analyst Cameron Hudson said, 'At the beginning of the conflict, I and others were saying it [would] be difficult for the RSF to sustain. And yet we have all been proven wrong and I think the difference maker has been external support....What is coming from the UAE is very substantial. It has kept the RSF in the fight.'⁵⁴ Gold extracted from mines under the control of the RSF in Darfur is transported to the UAE for trading, where Algoni Dagalo— the younger brother of Hemeti— is located. Dagalo oversees several regional endeavors of the RSF in the UAE, including Tradive General Trading commercial license— a company recently sanctioned by the US— which has been described as "a procurement company that has

acquired vehicles for the RSF."⁵⁵

Major port-management conglomerate, Dubai Ports World, has helped advance the UAE's regional interests and diversify its economic prerogatives. The strategic shift began with sovereign investment in Djibouti's port in 2008, before pursuing administrative control over Aden's port in Southern Yemen.⁵⁶ Initially perceived as a strategy centered on supporting authoritarian regimes in the Horn and Middle East following the Arab Spring, it has evolved into the establishment of extensive commercial networks spanning the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean.⁵⁷ DP World's partnership with Djibouti has at times been testy, causing Dubai to redirect its focus to Berbera in 2016, aiming to transform it into a prominent container port to sustain Ethiopia's maritime trade corridor.⁵⁸ Under this collaboration, DP World acquired a 52% stake in a venture to construct a 155-mile highway connecting Berbera and Wajale, with Addis Ababa obtaining a 19% stake.⁵⁹

According to an *Addis Standard* report in February 2024, the UAE has committed to investing \$2.4 billion in Ethiopia. For Abu Dhabi, 'Abiy is an eminent partner in the UAE's regional strategy,' with bilateral ties beginning in 2018, as the UAE invested in clean electricity sectors, and agricultural and infrastructural developments.⁶⁰ In an interview with the *Ethiopia Press Agency*, UAE Special

51 O Rickett, *Middle East Eye*, January 25, 2024

52 J Fenton-Harvey, *World Politics Review*, January 2024

53 O Rickett, *Middle East Eye*, January 25, 2024

54 Ibid, January 25, 2024

55 Ibid, January 25, 2024

56 J Fenton-Harvey, *World Politics Review*, January 2024

57 Ibid, January 2024

58 C Clapham, *International Crisis Group*, Jan. 25, 2024

59 Ibid, January 2024

60 J Fenton-Harvey, *World Politics Review*, January 2024

Envoy Omar Hussain highlighted the geographical proximity of the two nations as a cause for cooperation, in addition to Ethiopia's manufacturing capabilities and the consumption capacity of Arab countries.⁶¹ At the 2023 COP28 UN climate change conference in Dubai, the UAE pledged a further \$600 million to Ethiopia's energy sector. Prime Minister Abiy and UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan jointly emphasized 'The imperative of collective action in addressing the challenges posed by climate change.'⁶² Emirati and Ethiopian cooperation has, according to Hersi, also sought to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) influence in the region, particularly in Djibouti, China's key entry point.⁶³

The strong rapport between Abu Dhabi and Addis Ababa has tacitly contributed to Ethiopia's domestic political discord. The UAE has actively sought to bolster its regional diplomatic influence by spearheading mediation efforts, evidenced by its collaboration with Saudi Arabia in facilitating the short-lived Ethiopia-Eritrean rapprochement in 2018. This rapport was weaponized by Abiy, who invited Eritrea into the ENDF's war in Tigray, wherein Eritrean and Ethiopian troops committed war crimes en-masse. When the TDF response saw them gain significant ground in late 2021, the UAE provided Abiy with drones, which he used to decisively turn the tide of the war back in the Federal government's favour. The provision of Emirati weapons enabled Abiy to inflict a war of attrition on the TPLF, placing the region

under siege, wreaking catastrophic humanitarian conditions. By the end of 2022, the TPLF was forced into signing the Pretoria peace agreement in November 2022. Emboldened by the political leverage provided by his new arsenal, Abiy excluded Eritrean and Amharan allies from these negotiations, ultimately shattering the Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement and sparking insurgencies in Amhara state.

While it is unclear whether the UAE directly influenced the MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland, its delicate balancing act between Ethiopia, Hargeisa, and Mogadishu appears unsustainable in the post-MoU political climate. However, playing multiple sides is not unfamiliar territory for the UAE. In 2010, the UAE sparked controversy after allocating a \$50 million grant to mercenaries in Puntland, Somalia, aimed at enhancing maritime security and counter-piracy activities in the waters adjacent to the Horn of Africa.⁶⁴ This undercut the Abu Dhabi-Mogadishu bilateral cooperation central to the ATMIS (formerly AMISOM) peacekeeping force to Somalia, upon which it heavily relies. As the ATMIS transitions responsibilities to the Somali National Armed Forces, the UAE's future relations with Ethiopia, Somalia, and Somaliland are uncertain.

Saudi Arabia

The foundation of Saudi Arabia's soft power lies in its role as the custodian of Islam's two holiest sites and as the birthplace of Islam. The country's foreign policy has traditionally been rooted in the promotion of Islam as

61 *Addis Standard*, February 5, 2024

62 *Addis Standard*, February 5, 2024

63 Dr. M F Hersi, 2024

64 W Todman, J Bridger, & J Bahadur, *Foreign Policy*, May 2013

its official ideology and the advocacy of pan-Islamism.⁶⁵ Although Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman adopts increasingly secular approaches to domestic governance, Riyadh has strategically employed soft power as a means to counter regional Iranian influence, employing Islamic humanitarianism as the essence of its foreign policy framework.⁶⁶

Whilst the China-brokered rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023 alleviated some regional security concerns, the Tehran-Riyadh power-games prevail,⁶⁷ and has carved a presence that impedes AU peacebuilding efforts through exerting undue influence on regional proxies. Additionally, Saudi Arabia's fragile relationship with the Iran-backed Houthi movement in Yemen threatens the Red Sea, a maritime corridor essential for the food security of Horn-based actors.

With 60% of the world's uncultivated arable lands, the Horn's geographical proximity to the Gulf is particularly advantageous. Riyadh has also directed its attention towards Sudan and Ethiopia, particularly in agricultural investment and animal production, as part of the Kingdom's broader diversification and food security initiatives. Gulf states initially explored agricultural investments in Central Asia and Latin America, before identifying Africa's 'underutilized' agricultural land as offering the most potential,⁶⁸ with

⁶⁵ Saudi Arabia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 2015

⁶⁶ R Mason, 2022

⁶⁷ H Wimmen, D Esfandiary, A Jacobs, & D Wood, *International Crisis Group*, April 19, 2023

⁶⁸ W Plaizier, *World Economic Forum*, January 22, 2016

Saudi Arabia emerging as the leading investor in agriculture in the region.⁶⁹

Saudi Arabia has at times found itself at odds with the AU, impeding the Union's efforts to enforce its norms through sanctions. In its quest to secure raw materials and supply chains in Africa, Saudi Arabia's actions have legitimized coup-installed leaders by extending invitations to them for summits and bilateral meetings. For instance, the Africa-Saudi Arabia summit held in Riyadh in November 2023 saw the attendance of Burkina Faso's junta leader Ibrahim Traoré, frustrating AU officials.⁷⁰ This has also translated to Saudi Arabia's engagement with the Horn, as while Riyadh ostensibly contributes to humanitarian relief and reconciliation efforts, its checkbook diplomacy tacitly empowers non-state actors and threatens regional peacebuilding initiatives. The impotence of the Jeddah peace talks and the Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement are indicative of Saudi Arabia's incapability to maintain or foster a normative infrastructure for the Horn that is defined by diplomatic solutions, as opposed to violence.

Qatar

An alliance between Turkiye and Qatar emerged following the Arab Spring, prompting accusations of supporting Islamist groups against both countries, with former US National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster labeling them 'the New Sponsors of Radical Ideologies.'⁷¹ In light of the recent Turkiye-Somalia bilateral deal, the Qatar-Turkiye rapport is particularly

⁶⁹ W Todman, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, November 2018

⁷⁰ *International Crisis Group*, February 14, 2024

⁷¹ M Maziad, 2022

significant in terms of the Horn's security outlook, as it may indicate an amplified Qatari regional presence.

Qatar's engagement with the Horn has tended to be of mutual benefit, with Doha primarily employing soft power initiatives, demonstrated by a \$500 million investment initiative targeting Sudan's agricultural and food sectors in 2018. However, Qatar's agricultural investments in Africa have not been without controversy, as some of the states leasing land have struggled to produce enough food for their populations.⁷²

Doha's soft policy approach can be defined by its independent foreign policy that seeks to 'project its independence from Riyadh whilst protecting itself,'⁷³ with the Al Jazeera media network the most notable of its soft power resources. Qatar's diplomatic record has been more effective than that of Saudi Arabia or the UAE, assuming a mediation role between Khartoum and Darfuri rebel groups in 2008 combined with a largely successful rapprochement involving Djibouti and Eritrea in 2010.⁷⁴ More recently, it has played a role in restoring diplomatic relations between Somalia and Kenya, which had soured over a maritime border dispute.⁷⁵

Iran

For Tehran, the instability in Sudan has been an opportunity to secure a stake in the Red Sea arena, exploiting

the apparent absence of enforcement of international norms.⁷⁶ Motivated by access to Sudan's well-endowed resource deposits and the geostrategic and commercial value of Sudan's Red Sea state, Iran has attempted to persuade Sudan to permit the construction of a permanent naval base along its Red Sea coastline, which, according to a senior Sudanese intelligence official, would enable Tehran to oversee maritime activities in the vicinity of the Suez Canal and Israel.⁷⁷

To counter the UAE-backed RSF's evident upper hand in the conflict, the SAF has turned to look toward Tehran to enhance its arsenal, with *Asharq Al-Awsat* reporting in February 2024 stating that al-Burhan's SAF had acquired shipments of Iranian Mohajer-6 drones.⁷⁸ Ideologically, there is little common ground between Iran and the SAF. Tehran's intentions appear to be focused more toward strategic positioning opposite the UAE, rather than on endorsing al-Burhan's claim for Sudan's presidency. Martin Plaut explains the ripple effect of Iranian engagement with the SAF as having strengthened Eritrea's geopolitical position and stake in the Sudan conflict, having hosted SAF military training camps and facilitating Iranian arms shipments to Port Sudan.⁷⁹

Egypt leans towards supporting the SAF over the RSF, primarily because of

⁷² W Todman, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, November 2018

⁷³ S Gaid, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, November 2022; p.10

⁷⁴ *Ibid*; p.10

⁷⁵ *Al Jazeera*, May 6, 2021

⁷⁶ *Radio Dabanga*, January 12, 2024

⁷⁷ N Bariyo & B Faucon, *Wall Street Journal*, March 2024

⁷⁸ A Younes, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, February 4, 2024

⁷⁹ M Plaut, February 2024

the instability associated with the latter. However, their response has been more restrained than expected, largely hamstrung by domestic political challenges and the security situations in Gaza and Libya, allowing Iran to exert a more direct influence on Sudan's political trajectory, via the SAF.⁸⁰ Iran's involvement in the conflict emphasizes the breakdown of regional norms, signaling that Horn-based actors are prioritizing arming themselves over pursuing diplomatic resolutions.

80 M Mutiga & R Atwood, *International Crisis Group*, Feb. 3, 2024

5. Resolving Security Dilemmas

*'There is a reason why The Horn of Africa is considered one of the most unstable parts of the World– it's the only place we have seen countries break apart outside of the Balkans in the last couple of decades, and that is because states here are heavily contested and their legitimacy is questioned by segments of the population... and the risk of expansionism or irredentism.'*⁸¹

A rebalancing of the asymmetrical diplomatic and strategic relationships and prerogatives between the Horn and the Persian Gulf is imperative. Designation of groups like the RSF as terrorist entities should be seriously considered, and sanctions against states that fuel conflict through arms and funding should be leveraged, to recalibrate the social contract and restore stability. The willingness of Gulf actors to accept fragmentation raises the substantial risk that multiple regional groups— beyond the two Sudans— will lay claim to new forms of sovereignty and legitimacy,⁸² thereby presenting an existential security threat to the Horn sovereign actors. There is a pertinent risk of radicalization of dispossessed Horn actors due to the absence of adequate security frameworks, and these actors may seek retribution against those they perceive as responsible for their marginalization. There is also a psychological aspect to the situation. Actors feel more secure when global powers— namely the US and China— play a more active and responsible role in conflict resolution, rather than waiting for the 'choreography of international bureaucracies,' which

tends to prolong conflict.⁸³ With the US taking a back seat in conflict resolution, a security vacuum has been able to emerge, within which Persian Gulf realpolitik can thrive. This vacuum must be filled by multilateral institutions, which must be supported by sovereign actors, as multilateral initiatives have thus far been incapable of reestablishing security norms. Unless there's a collective effort to bolster Horn positions in a manner that fosters cooperation rather than confrontation, the region risks remaining vulnerable to the ambitions from the eastern side of the Arabian peninsula.

Regional actors must acknowledge the unpredictable nature of war, understanding that in the Horn, it often results in stalemates rather than solutions. In the context of the Horn of Africa, it typically sets the stage for subsequent conflicts and leaves the state significantly weaker than it was before the conflict. Horn and Gulf states must recognize that any action they take could escalate tensions and destabilize the region. Ethiopia, given its size and historic involvement in regional integration efforts, bears a particularly significant responsibility in this regard.⁸⁴ With this in mind, the

⁸¹ Ibid, 2024

⁸² A Rondos, *International Crisis Group*, December 2023

⁸³ A Rondos & A Mohammed, *International Crisis Group*, December 2023

⁸⁴ A Rondos, *International Crisis Group*, December 2023

priority must be brokering sustainable ceasefires that bring the likes of Iran, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia to the table, to find solutions that privilege political dialogue. The diplomatic channels that have engaged Horn-based actors have lacked substance, and must be replaced by backchannel diplomatic pathways that seek political, not military solutions.

6. Conclusions

The historical relationship between the Horn of Africa and the Gulf has been marked by a relatively balanced geoeconomic cooperation. Islamic humanitarian aid, investment, and infrastructural development have flowed from the Gulf region, while the Horn has provided resources to facilitate the diversification of oil-based economies, including husbandry and agricultural resources. However, as the regional normative architecture has disintegrated, the relationship has undergone significant evolution, leading to an imbalance. This shift has presented Persian Gulf actors with an opportunity for a stake in Horn hegemony, resulting in a rapid increase in financing and sponsorship of both state and non-state actors involved in conflicts within the Horn. The fragmentation of the international political order—demonstrated by crises such as those in Ukraine-Russia and Gaza—is a trend that has become strongly evident in the Horn, where Gulf states increasingly exert machiavellian approaches to their foreign policy.

The formerly attraction-and-persuasion oriented Gulf presence, typified through leverage of cultural and ideological appeal, has been definitively replaced by realpolitik and 'hard power.' Soft power has transitioned towards

offensive realism, which, as espoused by John Mearsheimer, prioritizes the pursuit of power and security through competitive strategies aimed at creating an anarchic regional climate, thus enabling Gulf prerogatives in crises such as in Tigray or Sudan.

Saudi Arabia has undermined multi-lateral authorities, the UAE and Iran have facilitated arms trades and exploited power vacuums through their expansionist psychoses, and whilst Qatar maintains its position primarily through soft power initiatives, its alignment with Turkiye suggests that it may assert itself more forcefully in the future.

Poorly facilitated rapprochement efforts and diplomatic summits have inadvertently exacerbated conflicts and, at times, undermined AU peace-building initiatives or IGAD's jurisdictional responsibilities. There is a pressing need for multilateral institutions and global powers to address the power vacuum in the Horn by facilitating security norms, providing leadership in conflict resolution, and fostering the development of a new regional internal contract.

7. *About the author:*

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8. *Citation:*

William N. Robinson (March, 2024) Persian Gulf Hegemony in The Horn of Africa: Patronage, Arms Trade, And Evolving Power Dynamics. *Published at, the Institute for Strategic Insights and Research (ISIR)*

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**PERSIAN GULF HEGEMONY
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PATRONAGE, ARMS TRADE, AND
EVOLVING POWER DYNAMICS**

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March 2024

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