



Securing the Near Abroad: Gulf and Turkish interests and influence in the Horn of Africa

Briefing Paper

Key points

- ***Closer relations, but not a top priority:*** Since around 2015, the importance of the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, in the affairs of countries in the Horn of Africa has been growing. At the same time, Turkey, which made a political choice nearly two decades ago to ‘open towards Africa’, has also strengthened its presence in the region. The Horn’s geographical proximity—the Gulf’s ‘near abroad’—means that the region demands consistent attention, particularly from a security perspective and citizens from the Horn are found in their hundreds of thousands seeking better employment options in oil and gas rich economies of the Gulf. Despite this, the Horn of Africa is still not a top foreign policy priority for either the Gulf states or Turkey, even if it does fit in to some broader strategic agendas in the region.
- ***New space for middle power assertiveness:*** A fluctuating US position in the Middle East and North Africa over the last decade, combined with the historical decline in influence of (ex-colonial) European powers, has created the space for such middle powers to assert their influence in the wider Red Sea region. This has come in several different sectors, including security cooperation (particularly related to the war in Yemen), economic investment and humanitarian or development assistance (notably from the UAE), and often a deliberately formulated combination of all three. China’s expansion via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) may offer investment opportunities in infrastructure that complement the Gulf states’ own projects, particularly related to ports.
- ***Opportunities and risks:*** For countries in the Horn of Africa—principally Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan and Eritrea—the involvement of more powerful and wealthier powers has offered opportunities, although not without some risks. The Gulf states and Turkey have quickly become some of the most important external players in the competitive political marketplace of the region, despite no clear individual or collective plan to do so. From the perspective of governments and other political elites in the Horn of Africa, the increased engagement and the resources expended offer the chance to drive domestic (or personal) agendas, and to continue a long history of avoiding capture by those of global powers, such as the US, China or European players. However, it also risks driving destabilizing political competition domestically, and in the region, as well as buttressing the power of political actors most willing to cooperate with Gulf agendas, particularly on security, rather than the needs of their populations.
- ***Inexperience and unintended consequences:*** While the scale of resources brought to bear by Turkey and the Gulf states in the Horn of Africa is substantial—compared with the economic strength of the region’s states—this does not correspond to the priority afforded to the region by policymakers in Turkey and the Gulf, or indeed much experience or expertise in the affairs of the region. This means that Gulf and Turkish engagement may be significant, and can often be implemented with impressive speed, but it is not always effective, and at times has become instrumentalized by the Horn’s astute political players for their own ends without necessarily fulfilling the interests of their new partners.

Saudi Arabia and UAE: A new security arena

In 2015, when his father acceded to the Saudi throne, Mohamed bin Salman's (MBS) elevation to Deputy Crown Prince and Defence Minister marked the start of a more assertive regional security strategy for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Principally, this has been driven by the desire to contain Iran—with which the Obama administration was then negotiating a deal (JCPOA) on nuclear issues—amid the continued fallout from the Arab Spring. The Saudi turn, supported by the UAE under the consolidated leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, has precipitated several other major security shifts in the Gulf region. This started with the Saudi and Emirati-led war in Yemen (a response to perceived Iranian backing of the country's Houthi rebels) and the 2017 Gulf states crisis, which between mid-2017 and early 2021 saw Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain seek to isolate Qatar, drawing in Turkey, as well as the states of the Horn of Africa.

While the Horn of Africa's states have only been minor players in these larger regional events all the states of the region were put under considerable pressure to choose sides, with uneven effects:

In **Somalia**, Saudi and more significantly Emirati pressure on the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) to break ties with Qatar led to a break in Somalia-UAE relations from early 2018, although Abu Dhabi maintains strong relations with Somaliland, and has cultivated ties with and influence in other Federal Member States, especially Puntland and Jubbaland, seeking to destabilize the FGS. These dynamics are continuing to play out in the context of Somalia's delayed elections, and disputes between the Member States and FGS over the form these should take.

Ethiopia, however, is of sufficient size to have withstood pressure to take sides, instead adhering to its tendency to maintain relations, leveraging its position as Africa's diplomatic capital—despite growing ties with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi since Abiy Ahmed came to power as prime minister in 2018, and Saudi-Emirati support for the Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement the same year. Gulf states' relations with Addis Ababa will be under strain as a result of the fallout from the conflict in Tigray, which has led to border tensions with Sudan (see below) as well as allegations of Emirati air support for the government's crackdown on the TPLF-led administration in Mekelle.

For **Eritrea**, the pursuit of maritime security interests has also driven Emirati and Saudi engagement with Asmara, which has hosted an Emirati military base in Assab used to support operations in Yemen. Eritrea, Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia are also members of the fledgling Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (Red Sea Council), which has shown an early focus on maritime security since its charter was adopted in January 2020 in Saudi Arabia. The crisis in Tigray, which has drawn in Eritrean troops, who are accused of committing atrocities, and the Ethiopia-Sudan border tensions, also complicate Asmara's relations with the Gulf states.

Sudan's 2019 transition—marked by the departure of Omar al-Bashir—has created challenges for Saudi, Emirati and Qatari engagement. All three states had functional relations with the former regime, and Sudan has long been a target for agricultural and real estate projects from the Gulf. Qatar lost influence and access with Bashir's overthrow, amid pressure from Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE on various elements within the transitional elite, particularly various security services. The UAE enjoys closer connections to General Hemedti's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which had joined the Yemen operations, and now wield considerable power in the post-Bashir politico-security landscape. The militarization and intensification of a long-standing border dispute with Ethiopia is linked to divisions between key actors in the political transition. An Emirati attempt to de-escalate tensions appears to have failed.

Turkey and Qatar: ideological alliance

The 2017 eruption of the Gulf States crisis reinforced a trend towards cooperation between Turkey and Qatar that had emerged since the Arab Spring, as the two countries found their foreign policy agendas had some resonances and overlapping interests. In the context of the embargo, Turkish support was important for

Qatar, while competition between Turkey and the UAE in particular escalated, including in Somalia, Sudan, Libya. Turkey has pursued a broader project focused on cultivating its own economic and political influence since a turn away from Europe in the late 1990s, while Qatar's agenda is more pragmatic and opportunistic than ideological, focused in part on maintaining its independence from its larger Gulf neighbours, especially Saudi Arabia.

The states of the Horn of Africa, particularly Sudan and Somalia, have been affected by the competition. The 2019 revolution in Sudan exposed the fragility of Qatar's and to some extent Turkey's position in the competition for influence in the Red Sea, particularly with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi more willing to back the new political dispensation. In the last two years, the Horn of Africa has lost strategic weight within the framework of Turkish foreign policy. This deprioritization is due to the policymakers' beliefs that in the context of regional competition (the wider Middle East) there is less gain in the Horn of Africa than in other areas. In Sudan and Eritrea, Qatar has lost influence as a result of the Gulf split.

Humanitarian assistance, migration and soft power

In terms of soft power, restrictive and sometimes abusive migration policies in the Gulf breed resentment in the Horn of Africa, particularly when these coincide with periodic waves of expulsion and employment nationalism in the Gulf. The Covid-19 epidemic has added strain to this already fraught relationship. The policies in the Gulf also contrast sharply with Turkey's educational and humanitarian engagement, including scholarships and language training. While the proximity of the wealthier economies of the Gulf to the Horn of Africa leads to higher migration rates than Turkey experiences, the difference in Turkey's overall approach benefits Ankara in terms of its accumulation of soft power.

The UAE, especially Dubai, has emerged as an increasingly significant player in international humanitarian architecture, particularly through the expansion of the International Humanitarian City—the largest humanitarian hub in the world—close to many aid recipients and key financial backers in the UAE. However, Emirati bilateral aid policy increasingly marries military relief and humanitarian intervention. Aid recipients are required to open their markets to state-led investment. Market expansion is an explicit goal of UAE humanitarianism and return-on-investment is central to state discourses around development assistance, whether this is market access, the establishment of profitable partnerships for future investment or keeping competitors out. Since 2011, Gulf donors have shifted from giving small-scale humanitarian aid to giving large-scale grants designed to stabilize economies, particularly those with whom they have a broader relationship in other sectors, like security.

Consequences for the Horn of Africa

Shifts in the priorities of the Gulf states over the last five years have had several, observable consequences for states in the Horn of Africa region. Some of the most significant areas of interest are outlined below:

Sudan and the Nile Basin: Under the Transitional Government in Sudan, there has been an effort to redefine the Sudanese interest in the Nile and Red Sea, where the elites have historically perceived themselves as caught between the competing interests of Egypt and Ethiopia, and more recently the Gulf States. On the question of the Nile, in particular, Sudan has taken a more assertive position. The escalation of the border dispute with Ethiopia may signal a tougher stance more generally on negotiations over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. However, this may not play into the interests of Egypt. Despite its fragile economic position, multiple factions within the Transitional Government seek to assert Sudan's position. This may result in a more astute leverage of competition for influence in Sudan in order to secure benefits for the country, but also raises risks around stability if projects associated with different factions are competing for external support. At a minimum, the situation presents a quandary for Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which have increased ties with Ethiopia, but retain interests in supporting Egypt's government. Turkey, and Qatar, appear set to be marginalized in Sudan in the short term, despite significant influence before 2019.

Somalia: Somalia's government is caught up in the latest dynamics of its transition towards a democratic constitutional order. The rapprochement in the Gulf States is unlikely to alter the short-term dynamics of external influence from Turkey and the Gulf States. Turkey's relations with the federal administration in Mogadishu have weathered two handovers of power, and Ankara is likely to be hedging its connections to ensure its continued presence. Given its commercial and security engagement, as well as substantial humanitarian and cultural linkages, including direct flights to Istanbul, its continued access seems likely regardless of the outcome of the current constitutional stalemate. The split in the Gulf States, with Doha retaining influence with Farmajo's administration in Mogadishu, while Abu Dhabi has maintained closer ties with the federal member states, especially Puntland—as well as its important ties to Somaliland—is set to continue. However, Qatar's relations with Farmajo appear to be under some strain, in particular over reports that Doha financed the training of Somali fighters in Eritrea (as well as rumours that some of these fighters may have been deployed in Tigray with the Ethiopian military). The highly transactional and volatile dynamics of Somali politics have lent themselves to the Gulf States' pattern of engagement. The incoming administration will likely face the same dynamics.

Ethiopia: The conflict in the Ethiopia's northern Tigray region illustrates the degree to which the profile of the Gulf States has risen in Ethiopia. The TPLF and opponents of the government's offensive in Tigray have claimed that the UAE supported the Ethiopian government with drone attacks on TPLF forces and equipment. The presence of Emirati military assets at the Eritrean port of Assab lends plausibility to accusations of its involvement, even if Ethiopia denies it. Ethiopian authorities claimed on 3 February 2021 to have disrupted a plot to bomb the Emirati embassy in Addis Ababa.

Eritrea: Asmara occupies a difficult position within the Horn's shifting regional dynamics. Since its independence, the country has been exposed to pressure from much larger and better resourced neighbours, which has led to conflicts. Currently supporting the Ethiopian government against the former ruling party in Tigray (although officially denied by both governments), Eritrea risks being drawn into a long conflict on its southern border. Asmara managed to navigate the 2017-21 Gulf States rift without severing its ties to Doha (despite tensions), but nevertheless remains caught between larger state agendas in the Nile basin and in the Red Sea. Its main agenda seems to be avoiding being overwhelmed by external pressures, key among which must be Ethiopia's continued internal stability, or the intensification of conflict between Ethiopia and Sudan. Turkey and the Gulf States have limited influence with Asmara. Cooperation with the UAE over the Emirati naval base in Assab is the most significant external security engagement.

Policy considerations

The election of US President Biden, whose administration is actively less hawkish on Iran, and more sceptical of Saudi Arabia than his predecessor's, may have significant consequences for Riyadh's regional agenda. This, in turn, will likely have a wider effect on the Gulf's relationship with states in the Horn and potentially open up space for an approach that is less driven by security considerations (most notably, the Yemen war). What are the consequences of this shift, and the longer-term interests of the Gulf and Turkey in the region for the UK? Can the UK use its relationship with, or influence over, countries in the Gulf, and Turkey, to further its own strategic agenda in the Horn of Africa and wider Red Sea region, and if so how?

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Support for cross-regional multilateralism

The wider Red Sea region has historically fallen between the remits of existing multilateral bodies. External engagement with the region has also tended to be siloed between the Horn of Africa, North Africa and the Gulf states. The Red Sea Council which was launched in January 2021 offers an alternative forum for intra-regional engagement. However, the Council has been slow to move forward since the charter was signed. Nevertheless, the pivot in regional relations by the Gulf states in response to the change of administration in the United States suggests that development of the Council may make further progress in the short term. In part, this is dependent on Saudi Arabia and Egypt affording the Council sufficient diplomatic investment, and Saudi Arabia in particular the financial support for the consolidation of the secretariat and the emergence of a common agenda.

For the UK, in seeking to support stabilization in a region which has become significantly more volatile in the past two years (with Sudan's and Ethiopia's transitions, as well as the crisis in Yemen), any progress towards regularization of the Red Sea Council's forum and agenda would be worth encouraging. Engagement with the Red Sea Council on maritime trade and security offers an entry point which could help stimulate movement on agenda building for the Council. Bilateral engagement with Egypt and Saudi Arabia in particular to indicate UK support for the Council, as well as with Sudan, which seeks a higher profile in Red Sea regional affairs, could reinforce this message.

Tackling regional crises

Gulf state engagement in two interlinked crises in the Horn of Africa may offer an opportunity to encourage more strategic and sustained, and less transactional, engagement—particularly from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Both states have developed significant investments in Ethiopia and Sudan in agriculture and other sectors. Emirati overtures to defuse tensions between Ethiopia and Sudan over the disputed Fashaga border region have yet to make significant progress. Both governments have indicated that they wish to avoid further conflict. However, de-escalation is proving challenging, in light of the on-going conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region. Ethiopia-Sudan relations are also complicated by tensions over the filling schedule of the GERD, which is set to come to a head again when Ethiopia's rainy season begins in June-July. Saudi and Emirati support for a negotiated settlement to the wider Nile basin could help to resolve the Ethiopia-Sudan border tensions, as well.

Both countries appear to have moved on from their very transactional and disruptive influence during the 2019 revolution, particularly since the UAE encouraged Sudan to join it in normalizing relations with Israel in late 2020. This may offer the UK an opportunity to seek to collaborate with Saudi and Emirati diplomatic efforts to encourage a settlement. The UK could usefully engage with Ethiopia to encourage it to support the development of a negotiation forum that enables constructive input from the Gulf states.

Donor relations and recipient country leverage

The UK is at a challenging point in the trajectory of its engagement as a donor in the Horn of Africa. British aid to the Somali transition has been substantial, and the UK is one of Ethiopia's largest bilateral donors. However, the UK's foreign policy and assistance policies are under review and potential reorientation at a time when the region faces significant volatility, putting at risk some of the gains in poverty reduction and stabilization achieved in recent years, particularly in Ethiopia. At the same time, the donor agendas of Turkey and the Gulf states have offered states in the Horn of Africa important assistance and investment. Setting aside questions of donor harmonization, the strategic nature of the Horn of Africa and Red Sea region suggests that external assistance will still flow, and the pattern of states in the Horn successfully leveraging their position to capture and instrumentalize donor assistance will continue.

Although there are questions about the impact of aid flows on the building of institutions, the political transitions underway in Ethiopia (since 2018), Sudan (since 2019) and Somalia (since 2000) also underscore the degree to which a more transactional politics are in some ways already entrenched in the Horn of Africa. The UK could constructively engage in targeted projects that support processes relevant to its goals,

especially poverty reduction and economic development, as well as leveraging strategic investment and assistance from Turkey and the Gulf. The Berbera corridor is a useful example, combining Emirati investment and ‘traditional’ donor support for logistics and process-development (i.e. the Ethiopia-Somaliland trade relationship).



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