

Gulf state rivalries in the Horn of Africa:: TIME FOR A RED SEA POLICY?

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## Gulf state rivalries in the Horn of Africa: TIME FOR A RED SEA POLICY?

States in the Arabian Gulf are cultivating long-term economic and political partnerships with authorities in the Horn of Africa. Both regions are unstable, and their union has significant security implications. Danish and EU partners' policies should reflect this.

Many states and international organizations overlook security in the Red Sea region. They view it instead as part of a broader agenda related to the adjacent western Indian Ocean, where Somali piracy has been posing a threat to the region's vital international sea lanes between Asia and Europe. Accordingly, many member states in the EU and NATO, as well as Asian and Middle Eastern countries, have conducted naval operations and land-based capacity-building in the Indian Ocean. Yet the question of security in the Red Sea is much more

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Economic integration: encourage the potential of current Gulf-led infrastructural developments by helping enhance regional trade among states in the Horn of Africa.
- Red Sea Forum: promote interregional political dialogue by supporting the development of a diplomatic track between states in the Gulf and the Horn of Africa respectively.
- Policy development: create a joint Red Sea sub-focus integrating existing policy commitments in each region.

# Gulf investments mainly follow the Gulf states' own agendas on economic, security and political issues



"Gulf states are seemingly using the Horn as a proxy for internal Gulf rivalries. Patterns of Gulf alliances with Horn states mirror the 2017 GCC crisis between the UAE and Qatar"

diverse and deserves attention in its own right. Landward, the Red Sea is bordered by the Horn of Africa to the west and the Arabian Gulf to the east, both volatile regions that host different varieties of political instability and economic inequality. Seaward, the Red Sea, a connecting waterway to the western Indian Ocean, has indeed been affected by piracy, but also by maritime terrorism, irregular migration, drug-smuggling, and illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing (IUU). An additional factor is currently shaping security in the Red Sea region, namely states in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) increasingly partnering with authorities in the Horn of Africa to provide long-term investments in critical infrastructure. This promises to create competition in the Horn, thus influencing its already volatile power dynamics.

It also creates a new area of intervention: the Red Sea region. With two vital chokepoints for international trade dotting its northern and southern borders – the Suez Canal and the Bab al Mandeb Strait respectively – the Red Sea region requires attention as a dedicated policy priority.

## Gulf-Horn cooperation

Only a few hundred kilometres apart, the Horn and Gulf regions have had little formal engagement with each other until recently. Now, several Gulf states are asserting themselves in the Horn on an unprecedented scale, bringing with them great political ambitions and matching financial resources.

Gulf involvement in the Horn revolves around policy issues that are central to the state apparatus, being related mainly to economy and security policy:

1) Entirely dependent on oil exports for revenue, recent fluctuations on the energy market are pushing GCC countries to diversify their economic base.

2) The 2011 Arab Spring and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood has led the rulers of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in particular to seek alliances across the Middle East, North Africa and the Horn to stop the spread of what they see as an existential threat.

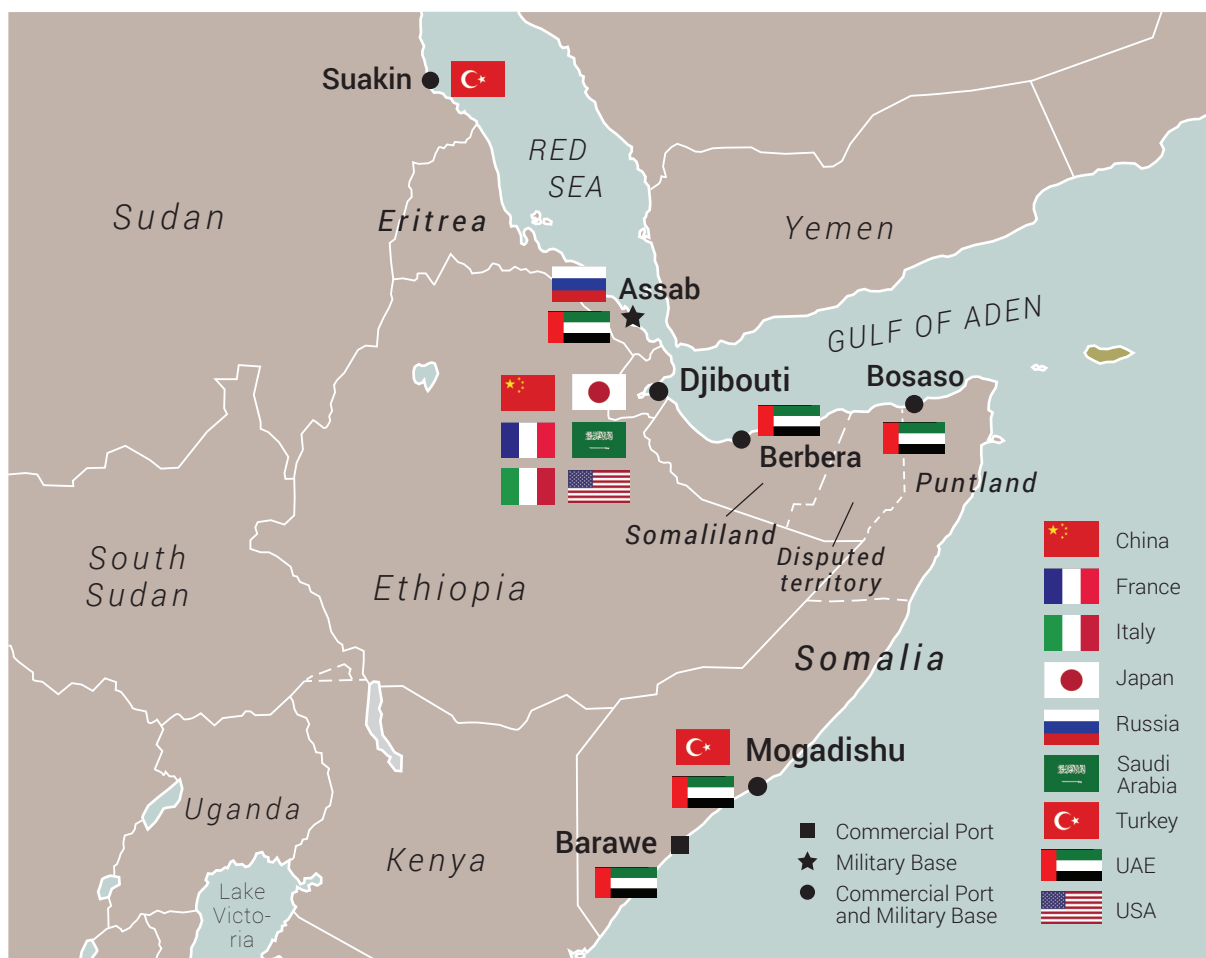
3) Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's engagement in the proxy war against their arch-enemy Iran in Yemen is also driving their interest in military engagement in the Horn of Africa.

Gulf allies Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been a major force in getting UN sanctions against Eritrea lifted, in return for which Saudi Arabia has been allowed to build a military base in Assab, the Eritrean port city on the Red Sea. Meanwhile the UAE is constructing a military base in Berbera port in the de facto state of Somaliland. In Somalia, Qatar has supported the education and health sectors in particular and is training the Somali security forces. Together with its ally Turkey, Qatar is also a major donor of humanitarian aid to the Somali government.

Also in Somali territory, UAE-owned logistics companies have recently won thirty-year contracts to develop deep-sea ports, one in Bossaso located in the semi-autonomous region of Puntland, and one in Berbera in the

## GULF STATES IN THE HORN ARE PARTICULARLY ACTIVE IN THREE AREAS OF INTERVENTION:

- driving economic development through investments in ports, manufacturing and other economic sectors.
- influencing the security situation through military training and the establishment of military bases.
- shaping regional politics by supporting peace talks between adversaries among the Horn states.



de facto state of Somaliland. As part of these agreements, the UAE is constructing a naval base in Somaliland and with Saudi Arabia has been training the Somali security forces in Mogadishu.

#### Implications of Gulf activities

Gulf activities in Somali territory create competition that might stimulate the regional economy. Until now Djibouti has enjoyed a monopoly as a regional port. It is seen as the gateway to landlocked Ethiopia, as well as serving as the home of international naval bases, a major source of its income. Its position in these regards is now being challenged.

While Gulf-Horn partnerships have the capacity to promote development, economic growth and regional integration, they are also producing several adverse effects. Looking more closely at their involvement, the Gulf states are seemingly using the Horn as a proxy for internal Gulf rivalries. Patterns of Gulf alliances with Horn states mirror the 2017 GCC crisis between the UAE and Qatar, when the UAE accused Qatar of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and suspected it of cultivating links with Iran, the arch enemy of the UAE's ally Saudi Arabia. These rivalries have spilled over into the Horn of Africa

region. When the newly installed President Mohamed of Somalia elected to remain neutral in the GCC conflict, the UAE stopped its training mission with Somalia's security forces. The UAE then turned to local Somaliland authorities with offers of support. This angered the Somali government greatly because Somaliland is not formally recognized by Mogadishu as an autonomous entity. This harms the legitimacy of the country's already fragile political authority, thus adding to existing tensions within Somali territory.

Another adverse effect is that Gulf investments mainly follow the Gulf states' own agendas on economic, security and political issues. Thus, while the UAE is Somalia's greatest trading partner and is currently investing in its infrastructure, the UAE and other Gulf states also receive illicitly traded charcoal from the Somali militant group al Shabaab. This not only undermines the UN Security Council's 2012 ban on the illegal Somali charcoal trade, it also weakens Mogadishu's poor hold on the security situation by providing al Shabaab with vital funding for their violent operations. Furthermore, the Saudi and UAE bases recently established in Eritrea and Somaliland provide the two allies with platforms from which to launch military operations in the deadly war in

Yemen across the Bab al-Mandab Strait, effectively linking the Horn of Africa to Gulf security policy. It also further militarizes the Horn, a tendency long underway with the foreign military bases in Djibouti. Such conditions naturally challenge the long-term, sustainable development of states in the Horn.

#### Implications for Danish policy

Gulf involvement in the Horn differs from traditional donor engagement in that it does not focus on state institutions or support broad-based reforms to facilitate democratic and economic development, nor does it necessarily reflect the concrete needs of the Horn region, particularly when it comes to security. Denmark, the EU and other donors should therefore take Gulf-Horn partnerships into account on a strategic and programmatic policy level.

To build on the economic potential of Gulf investments in critical infrastructure, Denmark and its partners should seek to enhance existing trade and economic policy instruments in the Horn, for instance, under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Agency on Development (IGAD) and the African Union. Supporting cross-border exchanges among the Horn states may also mitigate inter-regional as well as external rivalries, because it cultivates regional integration and cohesion.

However, economic development will not solve the underlying political tensions in the Horn alone. Denmark's and its partner's policies should also directly mitigate the adverse effects of the Gulf's involvement in the Horn. One instrument is facilitating strategic engagement with and political dialogue between governments cutting across the Gulf and Horn regions, for example, by IGAD and the GCC. Furthermore, via the EU, Denmark should help promote ongoing inter-regional diplomatic initiatives on security and economic cooperation and encourage the establishment of a Red Sea Forum. This could mitigate the divisions between Horn countries and balance the foreign strategic priorities of rival Gulf states.

Finally, attempts should be made to integrate policies addressing the two regions such that existing commitments in each region jointly adopt a Red Sea sub-focus, for instance, within the framework of the Danish Peace and Stabilization programme and the EU's strategic frameworks. Just as these engagements apply a comprehensive approach combining civil and military instruments, so it is necessary to ensure inter-institutional coordination across regional desks as well.

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Cover photo: Berbera Port in Somaliland before the Dubai-based global port operator DP World took over operations. Photo: Finn Stepputat



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