


## Fluctuating Saudi and Emirati Alignment Behaviours in the Horn of Africa

Federico Donelli <sup>a</sup> and Giuseppe Dentice<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Genova; <sup>b</sup>Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan

### ABSTRACT

The overthrow of Omar al-Bashir after three decades of rule has brought to light a dynamic that has been present for years: an interweaving of political, economic and security issues between the states of the Horn of Africa and the Gulf monarchies. Since 2011, the most active powers are the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which seek political support to counter both Iran's influence and the growing Turkish presence. The two Gulf monarchies' search for alignments with African counterparts has favoured the continuous reshuffling of alliances with direct effects on the local actors' strategic choices. These dynamics need to be considered to understand the determinants behind the currently increasing instability in the Red Sea area.

### KEYWORDS

Balance of Threat theory; alignment; Horn of Africa; Middle East; Arab Gulf states

On 6 April 2019, the anniversary of the last successful Sudanese uprising in 1985, the protesters who had been demanding Omar al-Bashir's resignation since December 2018 began their sit-in outside the military headquarters in the capital, Khartoum. The pressure led to military leaders intervening and forcing Bashir to resign as President of Sudan. A few weeks later, the protests had not subsided. Besides the Transitional Military Council (TMC), the targets of the protests were two Gulf monarchies, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), accused of meddling in their country. The Sudanese protests highlight a long-standing phenomenon, namely the involvement of Middle Eastern countries in the politics of the countries of the Horn of Africa (HOA).<sup>1</sup> Among the first to underline the geopolitical interactions between the two shores of the Red Sea was Roberto Aliboni (1985, 116), who pointed out that "Saudi Arabia's regional policies aimed at enhancing internal and external security have proved destabilizing".

Some countries such as the KSA, Egypt and Israel have been involved since the 1960s; others, such as Turkey, Iran, the UAE and Qatar for approximately two decades. Indeed, following a period of cooling down due to both systemic (brief US hegemony) and regional constraints (Iraq war), the so-called post-Arab Spring era has revived the Middle Eastern scramble for the HOA. As a result of the ongoing reshuffle of the Middle East

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**CONTACT** Federico Donelli  [donellifed@gmail.com](mailto:donellifed@gmail.com);  @fededonelli

<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of this article, the Horn of Africa region includes Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan.

(ME) balance, the main regional players have extended competition to neighbouring areas. The HOA is particularly receptive because of its proximities (geographic, cultural and historical) to the ME and the high level of economic disparity. Furthermore, the outbreak of the Yemeni civil war has increased the strategic importance of the HOA. Key regional players are now competing to gain the political support of the African states. At the same time, the HOA states are not passive and powerless actors, but have tried to take advantage of Middle Eastern rivalries. As a result, flexible and volatile alignments have been marked by sudden and drastic changes.

The article aims to examine and understand why some alignments have been formed and others broken since the Arab Spring. To this end, it explores the effects of ME rivalries on the formation of alignments with HOA countries, focusing on the efforts of the KSA and UAE. Accepting the dominant paradigm according to which the HOA is considered by both countries as part of their security hinterland (Ulrichsen 2011; Huliaras and Kalantzakos 2017; De Waal 2019; Cannon and Donelli 2019), the main hypothesis is that the KSA and UAE both want to align with HOA countries in order to increase their security by balancing against the predominant political and ideological threats posed by perceived challengers (Walt 1987; Schweller 1994; Christensen and Snyder 2002): the influence of Iran (KSA) and the rise of Islamist movements (UAE).

The article stresses how the behaviour of the two Gulf monarchies affects the balances among HOA players. As emphasised by several scholars, domestic and transnational political identity factors can explain threat perceptions and alignment choices (Barnett 1995; Katzenstein 1996; Gause 2014). This article follows therefore the trend among scholars in the realist tradition to introduce unit-level and perceptual variables into theoretical accounts of state behaviour in the security realm (Taliaferro 2000; Schweller 2004; Lobell 2009). The rationale is that the nature of the ME regional order as an anarchic, fragmented and disorderly subsystem (Lustick 1997; Legrenzi and Calculli 2016) affects the (in)security perceptions of the elite, driving them to adopt a foreign policy aimed at securing national security and regime survival (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami 2014).

## **Theoretical framework**

The increasing involvement of the two Gulf monarchies in the HOA and their behaviour in alignment building arguably has many elements in common with Stephen Walt's theory of Balance of Threat (BoT). Walt (1987) claims that states generally act to balance the greatest threats to their security. The BoT theory tries to answer a simple question, 'What causes alignment?' A major assumption of the BoT theory is that the balancing or bandwagoning of states is not determined solely by power, as claimed in Kenneth Waltz's well known Balance of Power theory (1979), but by the most threatening power (Walt 1985, 8-9). Accordingly, states choose their partners as a reaction to one or more threats. The degree to which a state threatens others is a function of four factors: its aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities and offensive intentions (Walt 1987).

This article focuses on two factors: aggregate power and proximity. The main assumption is that, following the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, which began

in 2007 and was completed in 2011, there has been a change in the distribution of power in the entire ME region (Del Sarto *et al.* 2019), and a broadening of its traditional borders, as demonstrated by the regional stakeholders' activism in the Horn (Ulrichsen 2011; Verhoeven 2018), in Afghanistan (Steinberg and Woermer 2013; Bell 2014) and in Libya (Dessi and Greco 2018, 67-87; Megerisi 2019).

The rationale of the study is that the reshuffling of regional power balances initiated by the outbreak of the 2011 uprisings has increased threats to the two Gulf monarchies, driving them to strengthen their bilateral cooperation also outside the traditional institutional framework of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). While Iran's growing influence and aggregate power constitute the main threat to the KSA, the spread of political Islam, via the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and *Al-Islah* in Somalia, and the increase in power of its main sponsors, Turkey and Qatar, threaten the UAE. Indeed, as evidenced in the BoT theory, the ability to project power and, consequently, to pose a threat increases with the decrease in distance (Walt 1985, 10).

Another clarification is in order. This study adopts the analytical concept of 'alignment' rather than 'alliance' because it is considered more suitable for understanding the multidimensional interactions between the two Gulf monarchies and the HOA states. The two terms are often mistakenly considered synonyms while they actually differ quite considerably (Russett 1971; Wilkins 2012). As Glenn Snyder (2007, 105) pointed out, "the protean character of alliances and alignments makes a clear definition essential". According to Robert Osgood and John Badgley (1968, 17), an alliance is "a formal agreement that pledges states to co-operate in using their military resources against a specific state or states and usually obligates one or more of the signatories to use force, or to consider [...] the use of force under certain circumstances". On the other hand, scholars have defined the concept of 'alignment' as "a relationship between two or more states that involves mutual expectations of some degree of policy coordination on security issues under certain conditions" (Miller and Toritsyn 2005, 333). The definition that best reflects the multifaceted and multidimensional character of KSA and UAE interactions with HOA states is given by Michael Ward (1982, 7):

Alignment is not signified by formal treaties, but is delineated by a variety of behavioural actions. It is a more extensive concept than alliance since it does not focus solely upon the military dimension of international politics. Degrees of alignments in political, economic, military, and cultural spheres present a multifaceted sculpture of national and supranational postures.

As discussed later, the KSA and the UAE have established relations with the various stakeholders in the Horn in a number of fields, from the military to the economic.

## **The change in power of Middle Eastern stakeholders**

Between 2011 and 2013, competition for regional leadership in the ME witnessed the formation of new alignments. While in the previous decade many scholars and analysts spoke of a 'new Cold War' with a strong sectarian character to indicate the rivalry between Iran and the KSA (Valbjørn and Bank 2007; Gause 2014; Santini 2017), as of 2013 a third pole or axis has formed. The increasing convergence of interests and the common revisionist approach to the regional order's structure and norms has brought

Turkey and Qatar closer together, leading to an alignment based on support of Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt (Öniş 2012; Yorulmazlar and Turhan 2015; Ulrichsen 2014). These developments have been determined by a mixture of systemic and regional factors that have changed the nature of the Middle East order. The Obama administration's pivot to Asia strategy and the gradual disengagement from the region combined with the instability generated by the 2011 protests and the outbreak of various civil conflicts. Formerly influential states such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq have lost importance and become subject to the influence of other regional actors (KSA, UAE and Iran). Therefore, the regional system has become much more open to geopolitical competition.

These processes have prompted the creation of three rival poles – the Saudi-led bloc or Arab Quartet (KSA, UAE, Egypt and Bahrain), the Iran-led Shia bloc (Iran, Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias and the Assad regime) and the Qatar-Turkey bloc – to project power and influence onto weak and disputed states, reproducing a new version of what Raymond Hinnebusch (2014, 51) calls a regional system of “fragmented multipolarity”. In the aftermath of the toppling of authoritarian leaders in Tunisia and Egypt and the election of the MB government in the latter, Qatar and Turkey perceived these developments as an opportunity to reconfigure the regional order according to their preferences. The revisionist approach of the Turkish-Qatari axis worried the Saudi-led pole (Lynch 2016), prompting it to assume a more interventionist attitude in regional issues and to launch a counter-revolutionary approach (Ragab 2017). Driven by the aim of minimising threats to their domestic stability, the KSA and UAE advanced a revisionist agenda built on a growing capacity to project power and intervene militarily across the region. It was not a completely new approach for the Emirates which, since the late 1990s, emerged as one of the region's most interventionist foreign policy players.

The overthrow of Egyptian President Mohamad Morsi (2013), who had gained support from Turkey and Qatar, resulted in increased tensions with the KSA and UAE, which allegedly backed the coup and the military-dominated government that took over and repressed Islamist movements including the MB. The event marked the beginning of the intra-Sunni struggle.

In a few months, the conditions changed and many of the political forces that Turkey and Qatar had supported, officially and unofficially, lost relevance and power and, as a result, also their influence. Although there was a clear alignment of the Turkish-Qatari axis with the positions of the Saudi-led bloc in some crisis scenarios (Syria and Bahrain), mutual distrust grew. Particularly the UAE, for which political Islam constitutes the main threat, began to perceive Turkey's pro-active policy as a primary threat to its own stability and regime survival. The Emirates' fear is that the rise of a government led by an Islamist political group could trigger a domino effect that would involve the Gulf monarchies – a fear supported by the presence on its soil of Al-Islah, a party affiliated with the MB.<sup>2</sup> The Saudi-led counter-revolution also intensified the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, worsening proxy confrontations, first in Syria and Iraq, and then in Yemen.

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<sup>2</sup>During the 1960s, the spread of ideas promoted by the Muslim Brotherhood and the presence of several members forced to go underground by Abdull Nasser's regime favoured the establishment of MB branches such as Al-Islah both in the Gulf (UAE, Yemen) and in the Horn (Somalia).

## Enlargement of regional boundaries across the Red Sea after 2011

Even though Saudi policymakers have always considered the African countries bordering the Red Sea as natural strategic partners, due to cultural affinities and geographical proximity, the HOA became even more relevant in Riyadh's strategy after 2011. Iran's ability to assume a dominant role in post-Saddam Iraq and strengthen the ties established in the previous decade with some of the Horn countries (that is, Eritrea, Sudan) prompted Saudi Arabia to extend its rivalry with Iran beyond traditional regional boundaries.

Two factors accelerated this trend. The initial turmoil in Yemen convinced Saudi leaders that Iran was trying to use the Horn for logistical support to supply arms to the Houthi rebels and encircle Riyadh in the Gulf. At the same time, the ever-increasing Turkish presence in Somalia undermined Saudi projects to spread Wahhabism among Muslim communities. As a result, the KSA elevated the HOA to the top of its political agenda as a key area for maintaining regional power balances and national security. Contextually, the nature of the interventions of the Sunni powers also changed. The KSA-UAE's growing involvement, in addition to being aimed at countering the Iranian presence, especially in Sudan, began to be aimed at checking Turkish policy.

The Arab uprisings also altered Qatar's and Turkey's systemic roles. Both states abandoned their former pragmatic stances and jumped on the uprisings' bandwagon to carve new regional roles for themselves (Salloukh 2013). Consequently, cross-sectarian convergences led to a dynamic realignment of strategic interests. Following the rise of the MB in Egypt, the KSA-UAE have prioritised, in addition to the Iranian threat, the ideological threat of moderate political Islam; as a result, they have been confronting Turkish and Qatari interests from Egypt to Somalia.

On the other hand, Turkey's threat perceptions also changed after the coup d'état in Egypt. Indeed, as pointed out by Walt (1987), states that are viewed or even just perceived as aggressive are likely to provoke others to balance against them. UAE interventionism, seen by Ankara to be ruthless and aggressive, raised concerns among Turkish policymakers, leading to a consolidation of alignment with Qatar and slow, but gradual convergence of interests with Tehran. In parallel, both the KSA and the UAE began to increase their economic and security investments significantly in several countries of the Horn. Saudi Arabia and the Emirates have sought to use financial leverage and their relative power at the regional level to pressure HOA states, such as Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia, to align with their regional policies of severing relations with Iran and opposing the spread of MB-affiliated movements.

While Iran, in the midst of other crises considered of primary relevance (Syria and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL) and the nuclear negotiations for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), partly reduced the strategic importance of Africa in its security agenda, the four Sunni powers increased their involvement in the Horn's security, economic and political issues.

From 2013 to date, two further fundamental events have driven the ME regional powers in their search for alliances and influence in the HOA, generating a continuous realignment of local state and non-state actors: the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen (2015) and the GCC crisis (2017). These two events changed the scope, the nature and the targets of the

intervention of the two Sunni allies, prompting them to counteract and balance against different threats. This meant rallying GCC states in support of the Saudi interventionist policy in the region, persuading Eritrea, Sudan and Somalia through investments, loans and central bank transfers to sign up to the pro-Saudi camp and keep Iranian ships out of the Red Sea (Cannon and Donelli 2019).

## **The multidimensional character of the engagement of the KSA and the UAE**

### ***KSA: education, investments and Islamic welfare***

For many years, the Horn was low on the political agenda of Saudi Arabia, and mostly linked to the dynamics of the Cold War. Nevertheless, in the 1980s, the KSA had very close political and financial ties to the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood. These links soured rapidly after 1990, when the Sudanese Islamist leader Hassan al-Turabi declared his support for Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Afterwards, relations cooled down due to Sudan's approach to Iran. Following 9/11, Sudan, accused of being a sponsor of terrorism, was diplomatically isolated and exposed to economic and commercial sanctions. As a result, the Bashir regime found in Tehran a crucial political partner and economic patron (De Waal 2019).

Iranian diplomatic activism and the alignment of several African countries (Eritrea, Sudan, Djibouti) prompted Riyadh to increase its presence in the Horn after 2008, exploiting its two main levers: oil and Islam. Consequently, the Saudi approach to the HOA was based on economic and financial aid, and on religious proselytism often referred to as "quiet diplomacy" (Richter 2014). Specifically, new impetus was given to a programme of public diplomacy launched in the 1970s and aimed at spreading Wahhabism through the opening of Quranic schools (*madrassa*) and training courses for imams (Bahi 2018).

After the 2011 power shift, Saudi attention was initially focused on Sudan, a country traditionally considered a partner as it is Arabic-speaking and a member of the Arab League. Although the first signs of rapprochement with the al-Bashir regime appeared in 2013, with a joint naval exercise in Port Sudan (*Sudan Tribune* 2013) and the sale of Sudanese weapons to pro-Saudi Syrian rebels (Chivers and Schmitt 2013), it was in 2014 that Khartoum undertook a decisive policy of cooling relations with Iran. The strategic shift away from Tehran took place in parallel with a rapid move towards Riyadh. The breakthrough in Sudan's realignment was the shutting down of the Iranian cultural centre (2014) (*Reuters* 2014), which paved the way for the breakdown of diplomatic relations (2016), following the storming of the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Tehran and the consulate building in Mashhad as a consequence of the Saudi decision to execute a leading Shi'ite cleric (*The Guardian* 2016). However, even before severing ties with Iran, the Sudan decided to actively support the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen ('Operation Decisive Storm'), deploying troops and jet fighters (Su-24M) (*Sudan Tribune* 2015).

The move towards the Saudi bloc took place at a critical time for the Sudanese regime, struggling with the economic difficulties arising from the independence of South Sudan and a growing discontent on the part of the population. Al-Bashir was in urgent need of new revenue to bear the regime's costs. Furthermore, the Sudanese government hoped

that the KSA would be able to intercede with the US for lifting the international sanctions. For Riyadh, on the other hand, Sudan constitutes a key pawn in the strategy of rolling back Iran's influence, and therefore the KSA used the remittances of the many Sudanese workers (nearly 900,000) hosted on its soil as a bargaining chip.

Another country that has realigned from Iran to Saudi Arabia is Eritrea. In the 1970s, the bipolar logic had prompted Riyadh to support the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, an independence movement that became a tool for putting pressure on the pro-Soviet Ethiopian regime (Derg). After its independence (1993), the Asmara government found itself isolated. Conflicts with its neighbours (Yemen, Ethiopia, Sudan and Djibouti), the US War on Terror and international sanctions pushed Asmara towards the Iranian axis of resistance. Eritrea's decision to allow Iran to dock its military and merchant ships in the ports of Assab and Massawa heightened concern in the KSA and Israel (Feierstein and Greathead 2017; for further details about Iran-Eritrea relations see also: Farrar-Wellman 2009; McAnenny 2014; Lefebvre 2018).

However, the first divergences with Iran began to emerge after 2011. Since its primary focus was now on engagement in the Levant (Syria, Iraq) and nuclear negotiations (JCPOA), the Iranian leadership understood that the relationship with 'Africa's North Korea' would have undermined its international credibility. The Saudi bloc was not slow in filling the void with financial aid and diplomatic efforts to bring Eritrea back into the international community. In 2015, alignment with the Saudi pole led Asmara to allow the port of Assab to be used as a logistics base for naval and air operations in Yemen (*Stratfor* 2016).

In addition to Sudan and Eritrea, Djibouti has also gradually shifted away from Iran. The government of Djibouti had long established friendly relations with Iran, to the point that, according to Saudi sources repeatedly denied by Tehran, it had allowed Iranian ships containing weapons for Houthi rebels access to its ports. In return for significant financial aid and increased security cooperation, Djibouti has broken diplomatic relations with Tehran and shown solidarity with and support for Decisive Storm operations in Yemen. Negotiations were also begun for the establishment of a Saudi military base on Djibouti territory. The talks were interrupted, however, by the growing tensions between the Djibouti government and the UAE regarding the unilateral nationalisation of the commercial port of Doraleh (2014), until then managed by the Emirati company DP World.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, since 2015, the signing of various bilateral treaties has strengthened the relationship between Djibouti and the KSA. Saudi soft power has played a decisive role in intensifying the interdependence between the two countries. The KSA has invested heavily in major initiatives and projects aimed at social welfare. In addition, Riyadh has financed the construction of social housing, schools and mosques through various Islamic NGOs, exploiting the religious dimension of its soft power.

Over the years, Saudi Arabia's promotion of an orthodox version of Islam, Wahhabism, a form of Salafism, constrained its relations with the main regional

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<sup>3</sup>The dispute between the government of Djibouti and DP World lasted until 2018, when, despite the contrary verdict of the International Court of Arbitration in London, Djibouti completed the nationalisation of the Doraleh terminal by establishing a state-owned company (the Doraleh Container Terminal Management Company).

power, Ethiopia. Friction between the two countries began in 1974 with the Derg's rise to power in Ethiopia. The different ideological positions were soon accompanied by mutual sectarian demonisation (Haggai 2007). In this period, the KSA began to use religion as a tool against Soviet influence, promoting Wahhabi teachings within the Ethiopian Muslim communities and supporting the Eritrean independence movement. Over the last two decades, however, there has been a gradual rapprochement, with the issue of economic migrants at the core of pragmatic relations. Indeed, more than 400,000 Ethiopians work in the KSA, many of them illegally, and constitute strong negotiating leverage for Riyadh (Solomon and Shumye 2017).<sup>4</sup> Despite Addis Ababa's concern that the Wahhabi influence may destabilise the country's multi-religious coexistence, the relationship between the two countries has entered a new era since 2017.

Finally, Saudi ties with Somalia have long been solid, especially in the religious dimension. Since Somalia's accession to the Arab League (1974), Riyadh has financed the training of Somali youth in major religious institutes in Egypt and the KSA. After the Iranian revolution, Saudi Arabia increased its efforts to strengthen Islamism in the country, promoting the first Somali political Islam movement (Waxda), modelled on the example of the Muslim Brotherhood. The repressive policies of the Siad Barre (1969-91) regime forced many young Islamists to seek refuge in the KSA. Simultaneously, Riyadh consolidated economic relations and became Somalia's main trading partner. After the outbreak of the civil war, Riyadh supported several Islamic NGOs in dealing with the humanitarian emergency, thereby gaining the sympathy of the Somali people. Many of the NGOs were established and managed directly by the Islamist movement Al-Islah, which is made up of members of the Somali diaspora in the KSA. They functioned as a soft power tool supported by both the KSA government and the growing number of Somalis who had fled to the KSA.

### ***UAE: farming, port logistics and security assistance***

The UAE's policy in the Horn has followed a different path from that of the KSA. Unlike its Saudi ally, the UAE's early involvement in the region was not driven by either motivations strictly related to geopolitical dynamics or the perception of an imminent threat. Rather, the Emirates increased its presence in the HOA in the late 1990s as part of its strategy of constructive engagement in international affairs aimed at diversifying its economic interests and establishing its global role (Almezaini 2012). The KSA was more interested in competition with Iran and guaranteeing the loyalty of Arab League members, while the UAE used Africa as both a testing ground for and a legitimiser of its global ambitions. While Saudi policy towards the HOA has exploited soft power, the Emirates has invested in smart power, namely in the complementarity of soft and hard tools. Historically, the Emirates' approach lies in three intertwined fields: business; humanitarian diplomacy; and security.

The early Emirati approach attempted to stress the difference with respect to both the Saudi model, conditioned by the centrality of the Wahhabi message, and that of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries, perceived by the African people as a kind of neo-colonial powers. To do that, the UAE combined activities in the economic,

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<sup>4</sup>After the 2017 GCC crisis, it was rumoured that the KSA threatened Ethiopia with a mass expulsion of its nationals if Addis Ababa did not sever its diplomatic relations with Qatar.



development and security sectors with investment packages of high social impact insured by the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development.

As with other Gulf monarchies (Qatar, Kuwait), the UAE's involvement in the region has been marked by efforts in humanitarian diplomacy – development assistance and foreign aid – considered a decisive tool for fostering trust building and providing international visibility (Bartlett *et al.* 2017). Like the Saudis, the UAE has also provided significant aid in the form of soft loans. Much of this aid has been provided bilaterally with no conditionalities and has substantially increased in the recent past in both volume and sectoral spread (Shiferaw 2016).

As pointed out by Karen Young (2017, 114–5), the UAE has generated novel aid mechanisms, including non-restricted cash grants, injections to central banks and in-kind oil and gas deliveries. During the opening period (2003-14), the UAE increased its economic interests in the area by making investments in niche sectors such as port terminal operations and sustainable agriculture. These steps were related to the broader programme to reduce the country's oil dependence and diversify its economic base by entering into new international partnerships, including with Africa (Vision 2021).

In 2006, the state-owned DP World signed an agreement for the development of the Doraleh port in Djibouti. Doraleh became the most modern container terminal in Eastern Africa, as well as the commercial hub of Ethiopian trade and a seaport for Asian goods directed towards European markets. Quickly, thanks to the port's development, the main UAE partner in the HOA became Djibouti. In addition to Doraleh, the UAE has taken control of other ports along the African coast: Berbera (Somaliland), Bosaso (Somalia) and Assab (Eritrea) (Cannon and Rossiter 2017; Khan 2018).

In addition to geostrategic considerations, a key factor here is economic security. From the UAE's point of view, the importance of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait in the Red Sea is twofold. First, because with approximately 4 percent of the global oil market the UAE is the eighth largest oil exporter in the world<sup>5</sup>, and the bulk of exports go through the Red Sea. Second, the Emirates aims to protect its investments in maritime logistics by consolidating the role of DP World at the global level. The mid-term project is to increase the importance of the Dubai port, making it the transit hub for Asian goods destined for African markets (Kerr 2013) – an objective that is intertwined with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Indeed, the Emirates hopes to take advantage of DP World's management of numerous commercial ports, in both Asia and Africa, to create a single complementary network to the new Chinese Silk Road (Abbas 2017).

Another sector in which the sovereign fund has invested considerably is farming. The geographic proximity of the Horn, coupled with cultural similarities and people-to-people familiarity in a number of cases, is an obvious pull factor for Gulf investment in agricultural projects, especially in Sudan and Ethiopia. The UAE, which imports more than 80 percent of its food needs, has purchased or leased productive land in East Africa. These investments were largely triggered by the 2007-08 spikes in global grain prices. To avoid local hostility and prevent criticism of land grabbing, the UAE has adopted a community-oriented approach, trying to pursue a formula of sustainability for the territories and indigenous communities, one of the guidelines of the soft power that has accompanied the presence of the Emirates in the HOA (Keulertz and Woertz 2015). These investments have been facilitated by the

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<sup>5</sup>Data from the International Energy Statistics.

returning Sudanese and Ethiopian diaspora, who frequently start businesses on their return, drawing on their Gulf connections to find business partners or investors.

The growth of UAE's economic interests and investments in the HOA has also increased its concern for regional security issues. To this end, between 2008 and 2011, the UAE augmented its military presence in the Red Sea, fighting Somali piracy on shipping routes and cooperating with local actors to improve security and counter the spread of jihadist groups. In other words, the UAE has gradually become a security supplier in the region. The UAE has provided extensive security assistance, especially to police forces, at different times and levels.

For example, with Djibouti, the relationship has become stronger thanks also to the Emirates' support in the fight against Islamic terrorism. In 2011, following a terrible famine, the UAE intensified its involvement in Somalia by exploiting the bonds of the diaspora and using the channels of humanitarian diplomacy. Aside from its commitment to conflict and crisis resolution, the UAE showed a first significant interest in African political issues. At the root of this interest were both economic and regional assessments. The UAE was convinced that a stable Somalia would increase the economic benefits of the port of Dubai, especially by curbing piracy along Somali coasts. Politically, a few months after the Arab uprisings, Abu Dhabi was worried by Turkey's entry into the affairs of the Mogadishu transitional federal government, fearing that this would favour the rise of a political Islamist movement in Somalia. Between 2012 and 2017, thanks to the link established with the President of the Somali federal government, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, the UAE invested heavily in the country, especially in logistics, health and security. The Emirates' influence extends beyond its direct investments. The UAE functions as an important hub for the Somali business community, as many Somali entrepreneurs operate their Somali businesses out of Dubai. The Emirates has also facilitated applications for citizenship as well as access to credit by the Somali diaspora (Meester *et al.* 2018).

## **Variable alignments**

### ***Operation Decisive Storm as a mark of the new regional interventionism***

Compared with the policy of containment and proxy-engagement pursued in previous years, the Saudi regional approach has changed significantly since 2014, concurrently with the progress in negotiations between Iran and the West on the nuclear issue. Saudi and UAE leaders decided to increase military and political coordination and developed a strategy to counter what they perceived as Iranian 'expansionism' in the wider region (Ragab 2017). As a consequence, in the place of their prior 'quiet diplomacy', there was increasingly a show of assertiveness and muscle flexing in response to security concerns. The two Gulf monarchies broadened their ties to the HOA in order to contain Iranian ramifications in the region and the spread of Hezbollah.

Following the rise of al-Sisi in Egypt, the Emirates' policy changed quickly. Indeed, the reshuffling of regional balances exacerbated rivalries, prompting the UAE to intensify its interventionist trend in the wider region. Within a few months, two factors accelerated this process and paved the way for a new phase of UAE interactions with HOA states: the

rise of Mohammed bin Zayed in the domestic sphere, and the worsening of the Yemeni crisis in the regional sphere.

Under the tutelage of the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince, the UAE adopted regional interventionism and increased its power projection by opening military bases functional to its regional aims. The strategic outposts serve both for competing with other regional players that are active in the area, such as Turkey and Iran, and for strengthening the position of the UAE within regional organisations such as the GCC and the Arab League (Telci and Horoz 2018; Rossiter and Cannon 2018).

The proxy war against Iran – intensified due to the US' gradual disengagement from the Middle East announced by the Obama administration – exploded on the Yemeni battlefield. On the eve of the military intervention in Yemen (the aforementioned Operation Decisive Storm, 2015), the UAE took a hard for-us-or-against-us line. With the aim of severing Asmara's link to Tehran, the Emirates began to provide financial aid to the Eritrean government, obtaining the concession of the Assab port where it established a military base.

The main threat perceived by both allies, the UAE and the KSA, was the Iranian influence on the western shore of the Red Sea, from where Tehran was able to supply the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Therefore, in order to cut off the supply lines and push Iran out of the area, the Sunni powers began to invite the support of the HOA countries (Cannon and Donelli 2019). Since the launch of Decisive Storm, the two Gulf powers have invested more than 2 billion dollars in the HOA, expanding their leverage and military presence on the Red Sea's western shore. As a result, some countries traditionally aligned with Tehran, such as Eritrea and Sudan, broke relations with Iran and chose to actively support the Saudi-led coalition. After 2015, all the HOA states, some openly (Eritrea, Sudan), some less so (Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia), aligned themselves with the Sunni powers.

### ***The GCC crisis and the alignments rift***

If the launch of Saudi-led operations in Yemen in 2015 had favoured the emergence of a common front among HOA countries, the GCC crisis split that front and led to the rise of new alignments. The process had already begun in 2014, when the KSA, Bahrain and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from Doha. The tension within the GCC increased, and in 2017 the Arab Quartet decided to impose a trade and diplomatic embargo on Qatar for supporting Islamist organisations and maintaining relations with Iran.

The GCC split brought Turkey and Qatar closer together. The increased cooperation between the two countries first became evident with the establishment of a Qatar-Turkey Combined Joint Force Command military base in Doha in December 2017 (Aras and Akpınar 2017).

In response, as in 2015, the two Gulf monarchies began to pressure the HOA countries aligned with them to break off relations with Qatar. However, with the exception of Eritrea, the other countries decided not to take sides as they had long established good diplomatic and economic relations with Doha and its Turkish ally.

Somalia was one of the countries that showed the most concern about the two Gulf monarchies' policies. The government led by President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo – and supported by Qatar and Turkey – expressed annoyance with the UAE's pressure. In

response to Somalia's decision to remain neutral, the Abu Dhabi government decided to accelerate its investment plans in Somaliland, further exacerbating the already tense relations between Somalia and Somaliland since the latter's declaration of independence from the former in 1991.

At the same time, even though Ethiopia has never taken sides openly, it has begun a process of convergence with the Arab Quartet's positions, driven not by ideological beliefs but by strategic and economic interests. Indeed, Ethiopia has adopted an attitude of tacit support for the Emirates' ports policy and has shown itself to be in favour of strengthening the ports of Assab and Berbera. The latter, besides providing an alternative route for Ethiopian goods, will have the effect of weakening the legitimacy of the Somali central government, which has always been considered a threat by Addis Ababa policymakers.

Sudan reacted differently. If Bashir's regime initially tried to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, in December 2017 it veered towards the Turkish-Qatari axis, allowing them to restore the Suakin Island naval facilities. Although Bashir had continued to maintain good relations with both sides as long as possible, his overthrow and the rise of the TMC have reshuffled alignments, bringing Sudan under the Arab Quartet's influence. Despite the efforts of the KSA, UAE and Egypt to avoid openly disregarding the will of the Sudanese people, their financial and diplomatic support has shown the Quartet's interest in seeing Sudan's military regime maintain tight control over the country's political transition (Abdelaziz 2019). The three states initially acted decisively in Sudan, driven by fear that a truly democratic revolution there could trigger popular protests in their own backyard. However, this has recently changed – or so it seems – with the drafting of a constitutional declaration aimed at paving the way for a transition to civilian rule (Cafiero and Al-Jaber 2019). The Quartet's decision to soften the hard line and lead from behind has been determined by the reputational costs of the long-lasting protests. Furthermore, as was happening in Yemen too, there were signs of disagreement and strain between the KSA and the UAE over the post-crisis political agenda. A more general reason is the UAE's apparent decision to move towards narrower national interests, proposing itself as the best partner for the stabilisation of the region, even if this means cutting losses and moving forward without Riyadh.

These developments show the leading role played by the two Gulf monarchies in HOA political and security dynamics – an engagement that has favoured the normalisation of some relationships (Sudan-Eritrea-Ethiopia) and the solution of some long-standing disputes (Eritrea-Ethiopia), but has also reawakened rivalries that never completely waned (Somalia-Ethiopia, Eritrea-Djibouti). This volatility, mainly the result of the KSA's and the UAE's attempts to expand their role in the wider Middle East, has, on the one hand, pushed the Gulf powers to double down on their alignments in the Horn – with a burgeoning collaboration that goes beyond narrow security interests – inviting countries to choose their side of the divide. On the other hand, this interventionist and polarising policy has induced other regional actors to expand their presence in the region to counter the influence of their rivals.

Although the KSA and the UAE share a desire to limit the rise of Iran in the Horn, their main motivation seems to be to establish a precise hierarchy of power in the Sunni Arab world. There are now two kinds of intra-GCC rivalries among the three main protagonists (KSA, UAE and Qatar): on the one hand, a Gulf competition based on soft power projection, and another involving the recent efforts of Arab monarchies to compete in geo-economic diversification. The KSA, for example, has always considered African countries bordering the Red Sea as a strategic battleground to protect and as loyal, natural allies, in accordance with Riyadh's political and economic needs. The House of Saud is investing heavily in maritime infrastructures (soon to open a military base in Djibouti) and civil engineering mega-projects (such as the futuristic city called Neom) in the hope that its strategy in the Red Sea will be useful to its economic diversification and able to secure the allies' loyalty through partnerships and beneficial agreements (Vertin 2019). Likewise, the UAE relies on diplomacy based on trade and infrastructures (also known as the geopolitics of ports) and on the adoption of an interventionist maritime policy. It is driven by the need to protect its economic and commercial interests in the Afro-Asian area and support geo-economic and strategic alternatives in order to circumvent Saudi influence in the Greater Middle East (ICG 2018). Finally Qatar, in cooperation with Turkey, is operating in the area between the Red Sea and the western Indian Ocean in such a way as to break through the diplomatic isolation imposed by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi and, at the same time, pragmatically pursue its own geopolitical and economic interests (Kabandula and Shaw 2018).

## Conclusion

According to the BoT theory, the emergence of threats mitigates the constraining effects of anarchy on interstate cooperation, driving states to align in order to achieve a common objective. This dynamic is visible in the behaviour of the two Gulf monarchies (KSA, UAE) in the HOA. This case study highlights how, once the threats have passed or are simply reduced, the partner states return to acting solely in pursuit of their own particular interests and self-preservation. After cooperating for several years through policies aimed at reducing their respective threats, the two Gulf states are no longer pursuing cohesive policies, as demonstrated by the sketchy handling of the Sudanese crisis and recent developments in Yemen. Before 2011, both countries' policies in the Horn were characterised by low-profile initiatives and behind-the-scenes negotiations with the HOA partners that aimed at promoting amicable relations and guaranteeing the peaceful settlement of disputes (Ragab 2017). Without significant coercive power, both countries used economic leverage for years.

This condition changed when the US gradually began to disengage from the ME under the Obama administration. Shortly afterwards, the two Gulf allies transformed from security buyers to security suppliers – a change that has affected the way in which they interact with their HOA partners. In the first period (2011-14), although the search for alliances between the KSA and the UAE seemed to be driven by the same rationale as a result of the strong personal ties between the two ruling figures, a more careful analysis highlights significant differences. While, for the KSA, the perception of an existential threat (Iranian influence) led to the

choice of building and consolidating alignments with the countries of the HOA, for the UAE, the decisive factor was the protection of its economic interests in the area – a view that changed at the end of 2014, when the fault line among the Sunni states worsened as a result of the UAE’s perception of insecurity, namely the rise of political Islam. Thereafter, the activity of Gulf players in the HOA became a kind of reflection of the geopolitical competition in the ME and a representation of the geostrategic maritime rivalry among the several medium powers engaged in the Red Sea and the northwestern Indian Ocean.

While the competition in the HOA among the Arab Gulf states may increase the strategic importance of the region, it also risks fuelling conflicts or exacerbating new tensions in the HOA, exposing the area to the propagation of external tensions that could crush the most recent stabilisation efforts which culminated in the normalisation of relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia (2018). In this scenario, the players involved in the region would intervene to protect their own strategic interests, and this could turn the HOA into another battleground of the increasingly geopolitical (im)balance in the wider Middle East (Verhoeven 2018).

As witnessed by recent events in Sudan, the KSA’s and the UAE’s interventionist policies in the region, through their investments, political interference and growing military presence, lack a clear vision for the Horn and often create antagonist relationships and protests that increasingly reflect the divergent goals of these outside powers.

## Notes on contributors

*Federico Donelli* is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Political Science and International Relations at the University of Genova, Italy, and Visiting Fellow at the Center for Modern Turkish Studies at the Istanbul Şehir University, Turkey.

*Giuseppe Dentice* is a PhD candidate in Institutions and Politics at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy, and Associate Research Fellow at the MENA Centre, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), Milan, Italy. Email: giuseppe.dentice@unicatt.it; Twitter: @GiuseppeDentice

## ORCID

Federico Donelli  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6093-3510>

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