

# Crossing Roads: The Middle East's Security Engagement in the Horn of Africa

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyse the growing enlargement of the spheres of competition from the Middle East into the Horn of Africa. It does so by using insights from regional order and realist neoclassical literature to understand the expansion of regional powers into this area as the result of strategic interactions within their own region. The central argument is that the clashing interests among Middle Eastern regional powers and power asymmetry with Horn of Africa countries are driving an increased security interdependence between the two Red Sea shores. This increasing security engagement by competing Middle Eastern states is producing an insecurity spillover which threatens to exacerbate regional instability in the Horn. It also presents a new role for Middle Eastern regional powers as security providers, particularly in the case of the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Turkey. To substantiate this argument, the paper analyses interregional security dynamics by focusing on three empirical cases in the 2015–2020 period: The Gulf Cooperation Council's crisis, the establishment of a Turkish military bases in the Horn of Africa and Israel's new diplomatic engagement in Eastern Africa.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Middle East; regional order; Horn of Africa; security engagement; Red Sea

## Introduction

While interaction between countries on the Eastern and Western shores of the Red Sea has been long standing, the reshuffle of regional power balances in the post-Arab Spring order has fostered a growing security interdependence between the two regions. The involvement of Middle Eastern powers in the Horn of Africa (HOA) has shifted toward a greater emphasis on security dimensions, especially after the Saudi-led intervention in the crisis in Yemen. The Red Sea has become more significant to the strategic projections of the Middle Eastern players. Accordingly, the spillover of power competition between Middle Eastern states has reached the HOA, affecting local political dynamics. What is the rationale behind the increased security interactions between the two shores of the Red Sea? Why have regional rivalries in the Middle East gradually been exported to the Horn? How has a region under geopolitical turmoil

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affected a neighbouring one? These are some of the questions that this article intends to answer. Within the time frame between 2015 and 2020, this study aims to analyse how the dynamics of Middle Eastern security and power competition have led to the increased involvement of regional players in the Horn. During the period examined, the involvement of the Middle Eastern powers in the HOA witnessed a rapid trend towards securitisation. The article argues that the clashing interests among Middle Eastern regional powers are pushing a harmful interdependence between the two Red Sea shores. In other words, the escalating regional tension within the Middle East's traditional borders has produced a centrifugal dynamic or spillover effect in the HOA that threatens to feed local tensions and to exacerbate regional instability.

To substantiate this argument, the article is framed within the regional order and neo-classical realist literature and divided into three parts. Since most of the external destabilising dynamics in the HOA come from the Middle East, the first section presents the central features of the Middle Eastern Regional Order while underlying the role of the key regional powers which are extensively involved in the Horn. The following section examines three different case studies that help to understand the spillover of a negative security interdependence to the Horn in the shape of geopolitical competition among Middle Eastern regional powers. The second section highlights the consequences of the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) internal crisis and its role in triggering the reshuffle of local and trans-regional alliance patterns, the establishment of a Turkish military outpost in Somalia which was followed by plans for a military base in Suakin in Sudan and the increasing Israeli activity in the Horn. Finally, the last section presents an emerging security pattern – that of the increasing activity of Israel in the Red Sea – which seems to deviate from the Middle Eastern alliance arrangements that have featured in the HOA to date.

## **The Middle East and the Horn of Africa: from autonomic to synergic security patterns**

### ***Transregional effects of a conflictive regional order: a neoclassical realist framework***

The global transformations that have characterised the international system since the end of the Cold War have given weight to the regional dimension of international politics. The strategic 'disaggregation' of the post-bipolar world has increased the number and degree of autonomy of the regions from the systemic level.<sup>1</sup> A regional order or a governing arrangement among state units is based on a particular power structure defined by socially constructed boundaries.<sup>2</sup> The structure constrains the state's actions but is not decisive, since it is also influenced by the trajectory of the regional powers' interaction. In the case of the Middle East, despite its high permeability to global influences, the central features of the regional order should be analysed as largely autonomous phenomena.<sup>3</sup> Following the Pax Americana attempts at the beginning of the new millennium, the

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<sup>1</sup>Alessandro Colombo, *La disunità del mondo: dopo il secolo globale* (Feltrinelli: Milan, 2010).

<sup>2</sup>Ariel Gonzalez Levaggi, *Confrontational and Cooperative Regional Orders: Managing Regional Security in World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2019), 5.

<sup>3</sup>Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: the Structure of International Security*. Vol. 91 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 187.

conflictive regional dynamics around the Iranian-Saudi rift not only continue, but also new players, issues, and proxy armed conflicts have emerged.<sup>4</sup> These dynamics have deepened the 'Greater West Asian Crisis', characterised by interlocked regional and local tensions.<sup>5</sup>

Historically the regional order has been defined by high permeability, variable alliances, zero-sum logic, and the general tendency to homeostasis, namely that no regional player has proved to be able to substantially change the existing balances of power.<sup>6</sup> Further, despite the power concentrations and the acute rivalries, there has never been a bipolar balance in the Middle East.<sup>7</sup> As argued by Morgan the Middle East is a region where 'states pursue security primarily via establishment and maintenance of what they consider a suitable distribution of power.'<sup>8</sup> Nowadays, the Middle East regional order is characterised by an open multipolar structure subjected to the international system's influences. Steward-Ingersoll and Frazier identify the region as a Hobbesian-type setting which forces regional players to either be aggressive, defensive, or balancing in nature.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, the regional order is fragile, fractured, endemically conflictual, and unstable. In recent years, there has been a trend towards exporting these conflictual dynamics beyond traditional regional borders. This trend has been triggered by the gradual downsizing of U.S. engagement in the region. The 'pivot to Asia' policy pursued by Obama and then Trump's laissez-faire approach have, on the one hand, increased the perceptions of insecurity among regional actors and, on the other hand, given them the incentives for a resolute attempt for regional leadership.<sup>10</sup> The increase in regional competition has favoured the quest for new strategic partners to strengthen the power of coalitions or regional blocs.

The regional order approach helps us to understand the nature and path-dependence of regional dynamics but is short sighted in providing a conceptual framework to address the interaction between neighbouring regional orders.<sup>11</sup> In that regard, the literature on neoclassical realism offers arguments to complement the previous approach. Neoclassical realism usually focuses on interstate competition rather than cooperation.<sup>12</sup> Building on the neorealist approach, it emphasises the role of the international system as a provider of constraints and opportunities to a state's foreign policy actions. Unlike neorealism, it

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<sup>4</sup>Gregory F. Gause, 'Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War', in *Analysis Paper* (Doha: Brookings Doha Center, 2014).

<sup>5</sup>Fred Halliday, *After the Cold War: The Maturing of the Greater West Asian Crisis* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 131.

<sup>6</sup>See Carl L. Brown, *International Politics in the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Ian S. Lustick, 'The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political "Backwardness" in Historical Perspective', *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 653–83; Pinar Bilgin, *Regional Security in the Middle East: A Critical Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2004); Louise Fawcett, 'The Iraq War Ten Years on: Assessing the Fallout', *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 (2013): 325–43; Raymond Hinnebusch, 'The Middle East Regional System', in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushirvan Ehteshami (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014).

<sup>7</sup>Raffaella Del Sarto, Helle Malmvig, and Eduard Soler Lecha, eds. *Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011, MENARA Final Reports* (Rome, 2019).

<sup>8</sup>Patrick M Morgan, 'Regional Security Complexes and Regional Orders', in *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World*, ed. D.A. Lake and P.M. Morgan (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 20–44 at 33.

<sup>9</sup>Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll, 'Regional Powers and Security: A Framework for Understanding Order within Regional Security Complexes', *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 4 (2010): 10.

<sup>10</sup>Neil Quilliam, 'The Role of External Powers: Global Actors (Part I)', in *The New Regional Order in the Middle East. Changes and Challenges*, ed. Sara Bazoobandi (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 93–118.

<sup>11</sup>An exception is the notion of 'insulator country' coined by Buzan and Wæver (*Regions and powers*, 41) in referring to Turkey and Afghanistan.

<sup>12</sup>Norrin M. Ripsman, 'Neoclassical Realism', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

addresses a complex relation between the systemic variables and the states external actions. Neoclassical realism, more than other theoretical approaches, has an eclectic nature that allows considering domestic variables, including perceptions, ideology, public opinion and political culture, with the inputs from the external environment.<sup>13</sup> This interpretation is particularly useful for the purposes of this article because it explains the factors that push regional powers to intervene beyond their regional order, generating a growing interaction between different regional spaces. As a growing number of scholars have pointed out, to understand the foreign policy of Middle Eastern players, it is also necessary to open the 'black-box' in order to consider the unit-level variables such as decision makers and domestic institutions.<sup>14</sup> The interplay between international and domestic dimensions, the so-called 'intermestic'<sup>15</sup>, is a permanent variable in the political and security dynamics of the Middle East.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, as underlined by Hinnebusch and Ehteshami the Middle Eastern states operate within an environment distinguished by high permeability and three-level interconnected configuration: the global environment, the inter-state environment, and the transnational environment.<sup>17</sup> The international systems influence on a state's actions, and a regional/global-driven threat overlay merged with liquid alliances, produce the same effect as in the case of a clear and imminent threat in which there is often a range of policy options that states can choose from, rather than a clearly optimal policy dictated by international circumstances.<sup>18</sup> The lack of certainty, both about threats and allies deepens strategic competition not only in the region, but outside it.

In order to address the growing interaction between different regional spaces, three conditions must be in place for this to happen: i) a capabilities gap in which the relative power of external actors – the Middle East – must be greater than that of local actors – HOA –; ii) a vital interest at stake in which an external power must find a specific interest justifying their engagement in a regional or sub-regional context different from their own,<sup>19</sup> and iii) an opportunity structure that offers rational incentives from regional powers to act in a neighbouring order such as power asymmetry, the existence of internal conflict or balancing policies in the destination region. This latter should present conditions of external dependence and endemic fragility such as to be particularly convenient – in terms of material and reputational costs – to the involvement of external stakeholders. For this reason, it is important to define the HOA as a security order. According to Buzan and Wæver the Horn of Africa is a good example of a *proto-complex*.<sup>20</sup> For the

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<sup>13</sup>For reviews of neoclassical realism, see Gideon Rose, 'Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy', *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144–72; Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, and Norrin M. Ripsman, *Neoclassical Realism, the State and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup>Bassel F. Salloukh, 'State Strength, Permeability, and Foreign Policy Behavior: Jordan in a Theoretical Perspective', *Arab Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1996): 39–65; Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushirvan Ehteshami, eds. *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014); May Darwich and Juliet Kaarbo, 'IR in the Middle East: Foreign Policy Analysis in Theoretical Approaches', *International Relations* (2019), 1–21. doi: 10.1177/0047117819870238.

<sup>15</sup>Bahgat Korany, 'International Relations Theory: Contributions from Research in the Middle East', in *Area Studies and Social Sciences: Strategies for Understanding Middle East Politics*, ed. Mark Tessler, Anne Dressel, Anne Banda and Jodi Nachtwey (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 149–57.

<sup>16</sup>Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016).

<sup>17</sup>Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*.

<sup>18</sup>Ripsman, *Neoclassical Realism*.

<sup>19</sup>Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, 'Neoclassical Realism and the Study of Regional Order', in *International Relations Theory and Regional Transformation*, ed. by T.V. Paul (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 81–2.

<sup>20</sup>Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*.

two authors the proto-complex witnesses a sufficient security interdependence to delineate a region and differentiate it from its neighbours, but the regional dynamics are still too weak and thin to think of the region as a fully fledged Regional Security Complex (RSC).<sup>21</sup> In other words, the Horn of Africa is considered as an unstructured security order. Unstructured security orders occur for either or both of two reasons:

First, where local states have such low capability that their power does not project much, if at all, beyond their own boundaries; and, second, where geographical insulation makes interaction difficult. Either condition can result in insufficient generation of security interdependence to form the structures of an RSC.<sup>22</sup>

However, if we consider the structural configuration of the Horn of Africa from the neo-classical perspective, by considering the relative power of each country, the regional security order reflects a more *power restraining power* typology. Stated by Morgan in his hierarchy of security orders, 'power restraining power' is a condition in which 'states pursue security primarily via establishment and maintenance of what they consider a 'suitable' or 'stable' distribution of power'.<sup>23</sup> In bipolar or multipolar regional complexes, this order implies a traditional neorealist balance of power. Self-interested states will build up conventional strength through arms and/or coalition building such that no state has sufficient strength to make aggression rationally feasible. However, as noted by Stewart-Ingersoll and Frazier this order may be different from a balance of power in that a power restraining power order could be unipolar, where 'a single state has a sufficient preponderance of power to deter aggression by other members, but lacks the structural or recognized influence implied by the hegemonic classification'.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, the high degree of polarity exacerbated by the absence of a clear regional hegemon leads certain ME states to engage in balancing and/or revisionist behaviour with states in the HOA.<sup>25</sup> These actions are pursued in order to enhance their own security interests at the expense of rival states within their own RSC. In other words, ME states would initiate or become involved in either conflict or rebalancing actions in the Horn (such as the Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement) precisely because these security interactions would potentially have the result of limiting or curbing the influence and position of other rival states in their regional order. In the corollary, HOA states would initiate or become involved in conflict or rebalancing behaviour within their own RSC such as peace talks because of balance of power issues within the HOA security proto-complex rather than attempting to influence events through security interactions in the neighbouring ME.<sup>26</sup>

In sum, clashing interests among Middle Eastern regional powers and the weakness of HOA countries creates a critically incentivized harmful security interdependence between the two Red Sea shores, feeding local tensions and threatening to exacerbate regional instability.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 64–5.

<sup>23</sup>Morgan, 'Regional Security Complexes and Regional Orders', 33.

<sup>24</sup>Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier, *Regional Powers and Security Orders* (London: Routledge, 2012), 6.

<sup>25</sup>Brendon J. Cannon and Federico Donelli, 'Middle Eastern States in the Horn of Africa: Security Interactions and Power Projection', in *ISPI Analysis* (Milan: ISPI, 2019).

<sup>26</sup>Brendon J. Cannon and Federico Donelli, 'Asymmetric Alliances and High Polarity: Evaluating Regional Security Complexes in the Middle East and Horn of Africa', *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2020): 505–24. doi: 10.1080/01436597.2019.1693255.

## *The Middle East's engagement in the Horn of Africa*

As mentioned above, the Middle East is a regional system characterised by multiple layers of conflicts. These conflicts exist both strictly in regional terms, but also under and beyond regional interactions and create troublesome security dynamics. The consequences of the Arab Spring have complicated the scenario even more. As noted by Gerges a 'psychological and epistemological rupture'<sup>27</sup> has occurred in the Middle East following the 2011 uprisings. Although the drive for change initially affected the domestic dimension of the states, the distinctive regional structure of the Middle East has enabled it to spread rapidly across national borders. The long-wave of the 2011 protests has thereby triggered the reshuffle of regional power balances. The most salient elements of the post-Arab Spring period have been the exacerbation of geopolitical competition among regional players and the change of cleavage lines. Since then, less importance seems to be placed on traditional issues (Palestine-Israel) and more on questions of legitimate forms of rule, Sunni-Shia, Muslim Brotherhood-Salafi, secularists, and Islamists.<sup>28</sup> In the post-2011 order, the most fragile countries of a wider arc of instability that stretch from Afghanistan on one side to Libya on the other, have become the battleground of a new kind of cold war among the leading players of the Middle East. As in the post Second World War era, when the United States and the Soviet Union brought competition and clashes into the so-called 'Third World', nowadays, the small-medium Middle Eastern powers have broadened the arena of their competition beyond traditional regional borders. Among the determinants of this dynamic are both the opportunity offered by the permissive multipolar order at the global level and the need to preserve domestic order.<sup>29</sup> Specifically, one of the factors that have driven the spread of competition outside the traditional regional boundaries has been particular regimes' quests for survival.<sup>30</sup> To avoid spillover effects that would threaten a regimes' security, Middle Eastern players have exploited the fragility or even the collapse of some regional and extra-regional states to export competition into third country contexts.<sup>31</sup> The struggle has in some cases turned into violent conflicts, either through direct intervention (Syria, Yemen) or through the backing of local groups (Iraq, Libya). In other cases, it has become a war of friction (Somali, Sudan, Kenya) aimed not only to gain influence but, above all, to reduce the rivals' gains. This relational conception of power drives the current Greater Middle Eastern chessboard. As a product of a strategic projection, the approaches by regional powers towards non-traditional areas has been an extension of geopolitical competence with typical check and balance mechanisms in foreign policy. Among the regions most affected by these dynamics is the Horn of Africa (HOA). The HOA owes its geo-strategic relevance to its proximity to the Indian Ocean and to the control of the southern gateway to the

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<sup>27</sup>Fawaz Gerges, *The New Middle East. Protest and Revolution in the Arab World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>28</sup>Helle Malmvig, 'Ambiguous Endings: Middle East Regional Security in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings and the Syrian Civil War', in *DIIS Report* (Copenhagen Danish Institute for International Studies, 2013).

<sup>29</sup>Ben Rich, 'From Defense to Offense: Realist Shifts in Saudi Foreign Policy', *Middle East Policy* 26, no. 3 (2019): 62–76; Thomas Demmelhuber, 'Playing the Diversity Card: Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy under the Salmans', *International Spectator* 54, no. 4 (2019): 109–24. doi: 10.1080/03932729.2019.1678862; Peter Salisbury, *Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy*. In Research Paper (London: Chatham House, 2020).

<sup>30</sup>Federico Donelli and Giuseppe Dentice, 'Fluctuating Saudi and Emirati Alignment Behaviours in the Horn of Africa', *International Spectator* (2020): 1–20. doi: 10.1080/03932729.2019.1706389.

<sup>31</sup>Cannon and Donelli, *Middle Eastern States in the Horn of Africa*.



Red Sea on the other (Bab el-Mandeb Strait). Due to its peculiar geographical position, the border area between Africa and the Middle East, the HOA regional complex is at the core of global interests such as the fight against international terrorism, the control of migratory waves and the tackling of piracy along the coasts. Moreover, the region enjoys a dominant position for the control of global trade routes, particularly the shipping of crude oil from the Persian Gulf to European and US markets.

Among the extra-regional actors there are also the Middle Eastern states, whose involvement is among the most pervasive in recent years. These latter states, thanks to geographical proximity, had begun to increase their involvement in the area; exploiting cultural and religious ties.<sup>32</sup>

This geographical factor is a key determinant in the choices of Middle Eastern foreign policymakers and a constituent element of any foreign policy strategy.<sup>33</sup> The geographical mental maps of policy-makers,<sup>34</sup> i.e. the way they perceive and represent political space according to their position in the world, are of great importance for foreign policy behaviours.<sup>35</sup> As scholars of critical geopolitics argue, how states define security depends also on the geopolitical imaginations of their leaders, modelled by identities, and revealed by discourse.<sup>36</sup> Among the policy-makers of the Gulf, there has been the revival of concepts that have long been disused such as that of Afro-Arabia.<sup>37</sup> Simultaneously, in a shared way with other regional actors such as Turkey and Iran, the idea of 'greater' or 'broader' Middle East has spread among policy-makers. Both notions share a new geographical conception of the Horn; in the first case the Horn is understood as an integral part of a macro-region (Afro-Arabia) whose core is the Gulf. On the contrary, in the second, the HOA is a continuation or a wing of the Middle East core compounded by the Levant and Gulf. Over the past few years, the conception of Afro-Arabia by Gulf policy-makers has been developed in a twofold dimension incorporating both economics and identity. Both are, however, led by a political projection that has resulted in growing interest in the HOA's issues. Turkey, after conceiving itself as a 'border' state or, at the end of the Cold War, a 'bridge' country between the East and the West, has developed a self-conception as the 'core' or 'central' country (*merkez ulke*) of a macro-region called Afro-Eurasia.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Asteris Huliaras and Sophia Kalantzakos, 'The Gulf States and the Horn of Africa: A New Hinterland?' *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 4 (2017): 63–73; Cannon and Donelli, *Middle Eastern States in the Horn of Africa*.

<sup>33</sup>Yves Lacoste, 'Geography and Foreign Policy', *SAIS Review* 4, no. 2 (1984): 213–27; Colin S. Gray, 'The Continued Primacy of Geography', *Orbis* 40, no. 2 (1996): 247–59; Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2012).

<sup>34</sup>Alan Henrikson, 'The Geographical "Mental Maps" of American Foreign Policy Makers', *International Political Science Review* 1, no. 4 (1980): 495–530.

<sup>35</sup>Luis da Vinha, *Geographic Mental Maps and Foreign Policy Change: Re-Mapping the Carter Doctrine* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2017).

<sup>36</sup>Kevin R. Cox, Murray Low and Jennifer Robinson, 'Introduction: Political geography – Traditions and turns', in *The SAGE Handbook of Political Geography*, ed. Kevin R. Cox, Murray Low and Jennifer Robinson (London: Sage, 2008): 1–14.

<sup>37</sup>Millions of years ago the two continents, Africa and Asia, collided into a single territorial entity called Afro-Arabia. At the core was the modern Arabic Peninsula. Interviews - via Zoom - conducted by the Author with Gulf policy-advisors, March-May 2020.

<sup>38</sup>The idea of the central country was introduced by the former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu who stressed that 'Turkey occupies a unique space. As a large country in the midst of Afro-Eurasia's vast landmass, it may be defined as a central country with multiple regional identities that cannot be reduced to one unified character.' Ahmet Davutoğlu, 'Turkey's New Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007', *Insight Turkey* 10, no.1 (2008): 77–96 at 78. For a more in-depth analysis of this topic, see Bülent Aras and Rabia Karakaya Polat, 'Turkey and the Middle East: Frontiers of the new geographic imagination', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 61, no. 4 (2007): 471–88; Şaban Kardeş, 'From Zero Problems to Leading the Change: Making Sense of Transformation in Turkey's Regional Policy', *TEPAV-*

Besides the geographical proximity and the many historical-cultural affinities (language, religion) the HOA has a few features that make it permeable to extra-regional influence. These include the endemic fragility typified by the high number of conflicts – interstate and intrastate – and the presence of some weak and failed states, the considerable disparity in wealth compared to ME countries, and the increasing centrality of the Red Sea in global geopolitics. Especially, the lack of a sustainable and autonomous economic system has accentuated the quest by HOA states for extra-regional partners (external dependence) and the risk of their increasing political interference. Therefore, the Middle East (ME) states have begun to view the HOA as a laboratory in which they can experiment with their ability as international stakeholders.<sup>39</sup>

## **The greater Middle Eastern crisis overflows into the Horn of Africa**

### ***The GCC crisis and its aftermath in the Horn***

The 2008 global financial crisis drove the ME countries to redirect their investment and economic interests towards regions less affected by the economic collapse, such as Africa. While Turkey viewed Africa as an alternative market for its products that could be accessed by enhancing trade relations, the Gulf states (UAE, KSA, Qatar) saw in Africa's fast-growing economies a good long-term investment. Deepening economic and trade links with African countries have enabled Gulf countries to further diversify their Sovereign Wealth Fund portfolios and to reduce reliance on oil revenues.<sup>40</sup> While global determinants favoured this rising engagement in the HOA between 2005 and 2015, regional power balances pushed the ME states to strengthen relations with their African counterparts on a political and security level. From 2015 onwards, two fundamental events drove ME powers in their search for 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 Qatar's crisis (2017). These two events changed the scope, the nature and the targets of the intervention of the KSA and UAE in the wider region, prompting them to counteract different threats.<sup>41</sup>

The turmoil in Yemen convinced Saudi leaders that Iran was using the Horn for logistical support to supply arms to the Houthi rebels. As a result, KSA elevated the HOA to the top of its agenda as a key area for maintaining regional power balances and national security. 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.<sup>42</sup>

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*ILPI Turkey Policy Brief Series 5*, no. 1 (2012); Aylin Güney and Nazif Mandacı, 'The meta-geography of the Middle East and North Africa in Turkey's new geopolitical imagination', *Security Dialogue* 44, no. 5–6 (2013): 431–48.

<sup>39</sup>Federico Donelli, 'Determinants of Middle East state's involvement in the Horn of Africa', in *POMEPS Studies – Africa and the Middle East: Beyond the Divides* (Washington, 2020), 51.

<sup>40</sup>Omar Mahmood, *The Middle East's Complicated Engagement in the Horn of Africa* (Washington: United States Institute for Peace, 2020).

<sup>41</sup>Eman Ragab, 'Beyond Money and Diplomacy: Regional Policies of Saudi Arabia and UAE after the Arab Spring', *International Spectator* 52, no. 2 (2017): 37–53; Ben Rich, 'From Defense to Offense: Realist Shifts in Saudi Foreign Policy', *Middle East Policy* 26, no. 3 (2019): 62–76.

<sup>42</sup>Alieu Manjang, 'Beyond the Middle East: Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in the Horn of Africa', *International Relations and Diplomacy* 5, no. 1 (2017): 46–60. doi: doi: 10.17265/2328-2134/2017.01.004; Jos Meester; Willem Van den Berg, and Harry



The first repercussion of this policy was the rapid decrease of Iranian influence in the region. Eritrea and Sudan, in an attempt to gain the utmost benefit from the worsening of Middle Eastern tensions, decided to break their relations with Teheran, in favour of a rapprochement with the Gulf monarchies.<sup>43</sup> A major shift in alliances proved both by the choice of the government in Asmara to grant the Assab base to the UAE to conduct naval and air operations in Yemen,<sup>44</sup> and by the Sudanese deployment of troops under the umbrella of the Saudi-led military initiative.<sup>45</sup>

KSA-UAE's growing involvement, in addition to being aimed at countering the Iranian presence, began to be aimed at checking Turkish policy, increasingly perceived as a threat to their interests in the region.<sup>46</sup> If the launch of Saudi-led operations in Yemen in 2015 had favoured the emergence of a common front among HOA countries, the 2017 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 so-called Arab Quartet decided to impose a trade and diplomatic embargo on Qatar. 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.<sup>47</sup> In response, the two Gulf monarchies began to pressure the HOA countries aligned with them to break off relations with Qatar.<sup>48</sup> However, except for Eritrea, the other countries decided not to take sides as they had long-established good diplomatic and economic relations with Doha and Ankara. A further effect of the GCC rift has affected one of the many inter-state disputes that involve the Horn states: the Ras Doumeira territorial controversy between Djibouti and Eritrea. The mediation between the two African countries was conducted by Qatar and sanctioned by the Doha agreements and the deployment of Qatari peacekeepers along the contested border. In the summer of 2017, the choice of Eritrea and Djibouti to comply with Saudi demands and to downgrade diplomatic relations with Doha prompted Qatar to withdraw its peacekeeping troops.<sup>49</sup> After the Qatari withdrawal, Asmara's troops occupied the border territory, reviving a situation that seemed to be subdued and heightening tension.<sup>50</sup>

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Verhoeven, *Riyal politik. The political economy of Gulf Investments in the Horn of Africa, CRU Report* (Den Haag: Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael', 2018).

<sup>43</sup>Reuters Staff, 'Sudan cuts diplomatic ties with Iran', Reuters, January 4, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-iran-sudan-idUSKBN0UI17720160104> (accessed December 8, 2020)

<sup>44</sup>Staff, 'UAE's strategy behind Berbera, Assab bases', *The Arab Weekly*, February 19, 2017, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup>MEE Staff, 'Sudan sending hundreds of troops to Yemen via Saudi Arabia', October 2, 2020. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-yemen-sending-hundreds-troops-saudi-arabia> (accessed December 8, 2020)

<sup>46</sup>Brendon J. Cannon and Federico Donelli, 'Asymmetric Alliances and High Polarity: Evaluating Regional Security Complexes in the Middle East and Horn of Africa', *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2020): 505–24. doi: 10.1080/01436597.2019.1693255.

<sup>47</sup>Bülent Aras, 'Turkey and the Gulf States: Geopolitics, Defense, and Security', in *The Dilemma of Security and Defense in the Gulf Region*, ed. Khalid Al-Jaber and Dania Thafer (Washington, D.C.: Gulf International Forum, 2019), 203–22.

<sup>48</sup>Ismail Akwei, 'Somalia under pressure to side with Saudi Arabia, UAE against Qatar', *Africa News*, August 17, 2017. <https://www.africanews.com/2017/08/17/somalia-under-pressure-to-side-with-saudi-arabia-uae-against-qatar/> (accessed December 10, 2020).

<sup>49</sup>Reuters Staff, 'Qatar withdraws troops from Djibouti-Eritrea border mission', Reuters, June 14, 2017. <https://fr.reuters.com/article/gulf-qatar-djibouti-idAFL8N1JB24N> (accessed December 10, 2020).

<sup>50</sup>BBC Staff, 'What is behind tension between Eritrea and Djibouti?', BBC online, June 20, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-40340210> (accessed December 10, 2020).

As shown by the Eritrea-Djibouti borders' issue, the regional developments of the last years prove the impact that Middle Eastern competition might have on HOA political and security dynamics. The crystallization of the intra-Sunni fracture resulted in a further reshuffling of alliances between ME players and HOA countries. Among the latter, the most involved were Somalia and Sudan, which for different reasons were both facing a period of domestic instability. In 2017 Sudan witnessed a period of deep economic crisis due to a variety of structural factors – South Sudan's independence (2011), and widespread corruption –, and a decline in the legitimacy of Omar al-Bashir's regime. al-Bashir, who had consolidated his relationship with the KSA since 2015, tried to gain as much as possible from the Middle Eastern dispute and in December 2017 signed a series of economic and security agreements with Turkey and Qatar.<sup>51</sup> The choice of the Sudanese leader not only cooled relations with KSA-UAE but also increased tensions with neighbouring Egypt.<sup>52</sup> Despite the lack of evidence that Omar al-Bashir's ambiguous regional policy led to the end of his regime, the events following his overthrow reveal the role of KSA and UAE as the main political and economic backers of the current transitional government.<sup>53</sup>

The Somali federal structure and the weakness of a country that is still considered a 'failed state' have made Somalia the country most affected by Middle Eastern rivalries. Following the GCC crisis, Somalia soon became another battleground of political rivalry between opposing alliances. Its six federal governments have taken different positions, moving in opposite directions and consolidating relations with different Middle Eastern poles. A key indicator was the choice of the UAE to invest in the port of Berbera in the de-facto state of Somaliland.<sup>54</sup> Although the decision pursues strategic purposes related to the control of the Red Sea and the developments in Yemen, the terms of the agreement between Abu Dhabi and the regional government of Hargeisa have undermined the authority of Mogadishu, indirectly hitting its two main backers (Ankara and Doha) and their efforts in the state and institution building process.<sup>55</sup>

### ***The militarisation of the Red Sea: the case of Turkey***

A further dynamic fostered by the Middle East competition that shows the growing interplay between the two Red Sea shores is the progressive militarisation of the Red Sea itself. This trend has been led by the policies of two players whose competition has risen significantly over the last few years: the UAE and Turkey. Actually, since 2017 along with the reshuffling of alliances there has been a speedy process of militarisation of the area

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<sup>51</sup>Shaul Shay, 'Turkey - Sudan Strategic Relations and the Implications for the Region', in *IPS Publications*. (Herzliya: Institute for Policy and Strategy, 2018).

<sup>52</sup>Par Mohammed Amin, 'Suakin: 'Forgotten' Sudanese Island becomes Focus for Red Sea rivalries', Middle East Eye, March 19, 2019. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/news/suakin-island-sudan-turkey-saudi-arabia-egypt-394055164> (accessed December 10, 2020).

<sup>53</sup>Samy Magdy, 'As Sudan uprising grew, Arab states worked to shape its fate', Associated Press, May 8, 2019. <https://apnews.com/article/e30e894617cf4dfb9a811af2df22de93> (accessed December 10, 2020).

<sup>54</sup>Brendon J. Cannon and Ash Rossiter, 'Ethiopia, Berbera Port and the Shifting Balance of Power in the Horn of Africa', *Rising Power Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2017): 7–29.

<sup>55</sup>ICR, 'The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa', International Crisis Group, November 6, 2018. <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/b065-the-united-arab-emirates-in-the-horn-of-africa.pdf> (accessed December 10, 2020).

through the opening of military bases and outposts by ME states.<sup>56</sup> UAE's and KSA's attempts to expand their role in the wider ME, 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.<sup>57</sup>

The Gulf monarchies' interventionist and polarising policy have induced other regional actors such as Turkey and Qatar to expand their presence in the region to counter their rivals' influence. After the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Turkey and Qatar have adopted a policy of strengthening their hard power. Within this strategic framework, the HOA is one of the regions in which Turkey has increased its presence. Besides a series of trade agreements and diplomatic level exchanges with the countries in the area, the real watershed of Turkish openness to the Horn has been the role assumed in Somalia in 2011.<sup>58</sup> Since then the country has become the pivot of Turkish strategy in Africa. After an initial humanitarian intervention, Turkey has supported the complex process of state and institution-building by focusing on the security sector. Turkey, together with other ME actors such as Qatar and the UAE, has launched a series of initiatives aimed at the reconstruction of the Somali defence capacity.<sup>59</sup>

The change of regional security patterns between 2015 and 2017 has affected the nature of the Turkish presence in Somalia. The Saudi-led intervention in Yemen and the following rift within the GCC with the emergence of a blockade – the so-called Arab Quartet – opposed to Qatar, a Turkish ally even in Africa, has given Turkey's presence in Somalia a greater geostrategic significance. Turkish presence in Somalia has assumed a greater security dimension after the decision to open a military base in Mogadishu, the largest Turkish base overseas. Although the base is formally and legally a military facility for the training of the Somali National Army,<sup>60</sup> in practice it is a full-fledged Turkish military outpost in the region and, consequently, a potential threat to the interests of its rivals.

The opening of the Turkish military training base in Mogadishu was accompanied by plans to establish a navy outpost in Suakin (Sudan). The small island of Suakin is an ancient Ottoman city of strategic significance both for the control of the Red Sea – it is at the crossroads between Aden Gulf and the Suez Canal – and for its proximity to the holy places of Islam Mecca and Medina. Turkey and Qatar had reached a trilateral agreement with Omar al-Bashir in December 2017 on a variety of issues including

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<sup>56</sup>Harry Verhoeven, 'The Gulf and the Horn: Changing Geographies of Security Interdependence and Competing Visions of Regional Order', *Civil Wars* 20, no. 3 (2018): 333–57.

<sup>57</sup>Brendon J. Cannon and Federico Donelli, 'Middle Eastern States in the Horn of Africa: Security Interactions and Power Projection', in *ISPI Analysis* (Milan: ISPI, 2019).

<sup>58</sup>For a detailed overview of Turkey's opening policy towards Africa see Birol Akgün and Özkan, Mehmet, 'Turkey's Opening to Africa', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 48, no. 4 (2010): 525–46; Mehmet Özkan, 'What Drives Turkey's Involvement in Africa?' *Review of African Political Economy* 37, no. 126 (2010): 533–40; Elem Eyryce Tepeciklioğlu, 'What is Turkey Doing in Africa? African Opening in Turkish Foreign Policy', *Centre for Policy and Research on Turkey (ResearchTurkey)* 4, no. 4, (2015): 95–106; Mehmet Özkan, 'Turkey's African Experience: From Venture to Normalisation. In *IAI Working Papers*, 2016; Federico Donelli, 'A Hybrid Actor in the Horn of Africa. An analysis of Turkey's involvement in Somalia', in *The Horn of Africa since the 1960s. Local and International Politics Intertwined*, ed. Aleksis Ylönen and Jan Záhorský (London: Routledge, 2017), 158–70; Volkan Ipek, 'Turkey's Foreign Policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa', in *Turkish Foreign Policy*, ed. Ercan P. Gözen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 217–35.

<sup>59</sup>Federico Donelli, 'Somali and Beyond: Turkey in the Horn of Africa', ISPI Commentary, June 01, 2020. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/somalia-and-beyond-turkey-horn-africa-26379> (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>60</sup>Ash Rossiter and Brendon J. Cannon, 'Re-examining the "Base": The Political and Security Dimensions of Turkey's Military Presence in Somalia', *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 1 (2019): 167–88. doi: 10.25253/99.2019211.09

security-cooperation and the concession of Suakin.<sup>61</sup> Although the core of the agreement was the restoration of old Ottoman buildings on the island, including the redevelopment of an old Ottoman-era port as a tourism hub. Despite official denials, many observers believed that the Sudanese concessions were the prelude to the establishment of a Turkish military base on the island.<sup>62</sup> The threat of a growing Turkish presence in the area alarmed Turkey's regional rivals such as KSA, UAE, and Egypt, and also had consequences for the relationship between the latter and the Khartoum government. Turkish projects in Suakin have suffered a setback with the overthrow of al-Bashir even though they have not yet sunk. The Sudanese transitional government and the military apparatus led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as Hemedti) have strengthened their ties with the KSA and the UAE by downgrading relations with Qatar and Turkey.<sup>63</sup> The direction that the Sudanese political process has taken in the post-Bashir era highlights two issues relevant to the article's aim. The first one concerns the exposure of the HOA countries to the spillover dynamics of the Middle East competition. The second significant issue is the capacity of the Middle Eastern actors to leverage the domestic political processes of the Horn countries.<sup>64</sup>

The Sudan re-alignment has favoured the increase of the UAE that, with the take-over of Port Sudan by the state-owned DP World, has added a further anchor to its security strategy.<sup>65</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup> The UAE is driven by the need to protect its economic and commercial interests in the Afro-Asian area and support geo-economic and strategic alternatives to circumvent Saudi influence in the wider ME.<sup>67</sup> The branched presence of the Emirates along the Red Sea – Berbera, Assab, Port Sudan – has increased the security dimension of the area. Therefore, the quest for influence by Middle Eastern states has made a decisive

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<sup>61</sup>Shaul Shay, 'Turkey - Sudan strategic relations and the implications for the region', IPS Publications, January, 2018. [https://www.idc.ac.il/he/research/ips/documents/publication/5/shaul\\_shay\\_turkeysudan11\\_01\\_18a.pdf](https://www.idc.ac.il/he/research/ips/documents/publication/5/shaul_shay_turkeysudan11_01_18a.pdf) (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>62</sup>See for example, Fehim Tastekin, 'Erdogan's Ottoman dream causes storm in the Red Sea', Al-Monitor, January 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fa/originals/2018/01/turkey-sudan-cooperation-sparks-worry-in-gulf.html> (accessed April 20, 2020); Par Mohammed Amin, 'Suakin: 'Forgotten' Sudanese island becomes focus for Red Sea rivalries', Middle East Eye, March 19, 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/news/suakin-island-sudan-turkey-saudi-arabia-egypt-394055164> (accessed April 20, 2020).

<sup>63</sup>Reuters Staff, 'Head of Sudan's military council meets Abu Dhabi crown prince', Reuters, May 26, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-politics-emirates-idUSKCN1SW0TO> (accessed December 17, 2020); Annalisa Perteghella, 'A Pax Arabica for Sudan?', ISPI Commentary, May 20, 2020. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/pax-arabica-sudan-26189> (accessed December 17, 2020).

<sup>64</sup>For a more in-depth analysis of the role of the Gulf monarchies in the Sudanese transition, see Jean-Baptiste Gallopin, 'The Great Game of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Sudan', in *POMEPS Studies – Africa and the Middle East: Beyond the Divides* (Washington, 2020).

<sup>65</sup>AA.VV., 'UAE taking steps to gain control of Sudan's main port', Al-Jazeera, April 20, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/uae-steps-gain-control-sudan-main-port-200423205443903.html> (accessed May 4, 2020).

<sup>66</sup>Braden Fuller and Valentin D'Hauthuille, *Exporting (In)Stability: The UAE's Role in Yemen and the Horn of Africa*, ACLED Critical Insight: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2018.

<sup>67</sup>There are several studies on the Emirates port policy, see for example Brendon J. Cannon and Ash Rossiter, 'Ethiopia, Berbera Port and the Shifting Balance of Power in the Horn of Africa', *Rising Power Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2017): 7–29; Taimur Khan, *UAE and the Horn of Africa: A Tale of Two Ports* (Washington: The Arab Gulf States Institute, 2018); Rory Miller and Harry Verhoeven, 'Overcoming smallness: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and strategic realignment in the Gulf', *International Politics* 57, no. 1 (2020): 1–20. doi: 10.1057/s41311-019-00180-0; Betül Dogan-Akkas, 'The UAE's foreign policymaking in Yemen: from bandwagoning to buck-passing', *Third World Quarterly* (2020). doi: 10.1080/01436597.2020.1842730.

contribution to the militarisation of the Horn, changing the balance of power among local, state, and non-state actors.

### ***Israel's (re)engagement in the Horn of Africa***

During the Ethiopian stop in the July 2016 African Tour by the Israeli Prime Minister – the first since Rabin's visit to Morocco in 1993 – PM Benjamin Netanyahu tweeted that 'Israel is coming back to Africa; Africa is coming back to Israel'.<sup>68</sup> Israel was signalling its intention to try to return to Golda Meir's golden years where the newborn state developed a wide array of technical assistance programmes in Africa during the '50s and '60s. While the Arab-Israeli rivalry and the Palestinian question limited Israel's Africa agenda, a recovery started after the signing of the Oslo Agreements, which began the normalisation of diplomatic relations and led to the opening of embassies in HOA countries such as Ethiopia and Eritrea. In the last two decades, there has been serious effort, not only to strengthen links with traditional partners such as Kenya or Addis Ababa, but also to rebuild ties with non-friendly Islamic countries like Chad or even Sudan.

Despite being portrayed as a Mediterranean country which faces traditional security challenges with North African countries, the Red Sea dimension has an enormous relevance both economically and strategically for Israel. This connects Israel with the HOA. On the one hand, the Gulf of Aqaba is a direct connection with vital sea lanes that connect around 20% of Israeli trade and passes the HOA, travelling through the Bab El-Mandeb Strait.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, geopolitical competition and security instability along the HOA matters, especially due to the ties between rival states and proxy groups in neighbouring territories. In that regard both the strategic projection of Iran and the Al-Qaeda offshoot al-Shabaab in Somalia are critical regional threats.<sup>70</sup>

In facing these threats, the Likud government has responded by using both a diplomatic attraction strategy and the use of military and intelligence strength. The experts have named these novel actions as a 'great return'<sup>71</sup> with no 'imperialist' agenda and as part of a 'Periphery Doctrine 2.0'<sup>72</sup> in which Israel looks for key regional partners in Eastern Africa such as Ethiopia, South Sudan, Kenya, and Uganda, thus emulating the Cold War Periphery Doctrine which relied on strategic relations with non-Arab states like Kemalist's Turkey and Pahlavi's Iran.<sup>73</sup> However, there are some criticism about the 'deep penetration'<sup>74</sup> and provision of

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<sup>68</sup>Netanyahu, Benjamin, Twitter account, July 7, 2016, 4.29 PM, <https://twitter.com/netanyahu/status/751060479532040192>

<sup>69</sup>Fasii, Fahad, 'Israeli Penetration into East Africa Objectives and Risks', Al Jazeera, September 29, 2016, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2016/09/israeli-penetration-east-africa-objectives-risks-160929102604246.html> (accessed May 22, 2020), 5–7.

<sup>70</sup>Michael B. Bishku, 'Israel and South Sudan: A Convergence of Interests', *Middle East Policy* 26, no. 4 (2019): 40–52, at 41.

<sup>71</sup>Maxime Perez, *Israel's big return to the East and Horn of Africa* (The African Report, 2011); Peter J. Pham, 'Israel's Return to Africa', in *Africa Source* (The Atlantic Council, 2016).

<sup>72</sup>Jan Ab, 'An unknown Chapter: Israel's Re-emerging Relations with Africa', in *ASCL Africanist Blog* (Leiden: African Studies Centre Leiden, 2019).

<sup>73</sup>Michael B. Bishku, 'Israel and South Sudan: A Convergence of Interests', *Middle East Policy* 26, no. 4 (109): 40–52 at 44–45.

<sup>74</sup>Fasii, Fahad, 'Israeli Penetration into East Africa Objectives and Risks', Al Jazeera, September 29, 2016, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2016/09/israeli-penetration-east-africa-objectives-risks-160929102604246.html> (accessed May 22, 2020).

weaponry involved in this strategy that exacerbate internal conflicts like the South Sudanese civil war.<sup>75</sup>

The initial movement started after an increasing Iranian presence in the HoA region. This did not only impact Israel, but also negatively impacted Arabian national security activities in the region.<sup>76</sup> Throughout the 2000s, Sudan and Eritrea became the major regional allies of Tehran with clear strategic implications. According to Israeli officials, Sudan offers a smuggling route from Port Sudan and then to the Egyptian Sinai which helps Hamas to acquire weaponry. Regarding Asmara, both Israel and Riyadh criticised a naval arrangement with the Islamic Republic which ended in shipping arms to al-Houthi rebels using the Port of Assab, near Bab el-Mandeb.<sup>77</sup>

In 2009, two incidents occurred. Iran sent two destroyers to the Gulf of Aden in the middle of the Gaza's Cast Lead Operation, while Israeli air forces destroyed a truck column in Sudan, apparently killing Iranian Revolutionary Guards.<sup>78</sup> Later, there were reports of recurrent Iranian naval presence at the Port of Assab, while Israel seemed to deploy 'small naval teams in the Dahlak archipelago and Massawa and a listening post in Amba Soira'.<sup>79</sup> Tel Aviv was not alone in the area in working against Iranian interests since there has been a growing convergence of interests between Israel and the KSA-UAE. KSA was forming a Coalition to fight the Houthis in Yemen and needed to curb all the logistical support originating from Iran. In that sense, Riyadh pressured for a decrease in Sudan's political and military cooperation with Tehran in exchange for tangible benefits. As a consequence of an assertive Saudi diplomacy – backed by most of the GCC countries – not only did Sudan close all the Iranian cultural centres and deploy troops to the Saudi-led Arab coalition, but along with Somalia, Djibouti, and Comoros expelled their Iranian ambassadors.<sup>80</sup> Eritrea followed a similar path collaborating logistically with the Saudi-led war effort.

As the Iranian presence in the Red Sea was downsized by the Saudi-led coalition, Israel took the chance to normalise and deepen relations with the HOA countries, especially those allied against the Houthis' Iranian proxy. Netanyahu resorted to the United States to soften relations<sup>81</sup> and the Saudi-led coalition – particularly Egypt and the UAE – to act as agents. According to Yucel, these countries serve as a tool 'in its political, economic and strategic moves and drive to open political room for Tel Aviv to repair or advance ties with North African countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, as well as Sudan, Chad, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania'.<sup>82</sup> Since then, Israel's relations with the HOA countries have gained momentum. In the period 2015–2020, Netanyahu visited Africa five times, visiting eight countries and gaining access to flight authorisation through the Sudan

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<sup>75</sup>Sadeh, Shuki, 'Inside the Shadowy World of Israeli Arms Dealers', Haaretz, January 11, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-inside-the-shadowy-world-of-israeli-arms-dealers-1.8379032> (accessed May 24, 2020).

<sup>76</sup>Najla Mari, 'Iran in the Face of the International Scramble for Africa', *Journal of Iranian Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 56–69 at 57.

<sup>77</sup>Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, 'Iran scrambles in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 1 (2018): 133–50.

<sup>78</sup>Andrew McGregor, 'Strange Days on the Red Sea Coast: A New Theater for the Israel-Iran Conflict?' *Terrorism Monitor* 7, no. 8 (2009): 6–10.

<sup>79</sup>Eritrea: Another Venue for the Iran-Israel Rivalry', Stratfor, December 11, 2012, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/eritrea-another-venue-iran-israel-rivalry> (accessed May 25, 2020).

<sup>80</sup>Mari, 'Iran in the Face of the International Scramble for Africa', 56–69 at 60.

<sup>81</sup>Kelly, Laura, 'Trump looks to Africa to counter Iran', The Hill, February 02, 2020, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/482675-trump-looks-to-africa-to-counter-iran> (accessed May 23, 2020).

<sup>82</sup>Yucel, Osman, 'Israel Adopts New Africa Policy through UAE', Anadolu Agency, February 20, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-israel-adopts-new-africa-policy-through-uae/1739789> (accessed May 23, 2020).



and Chadian skies. Regarding these states, the diplomatic strategy seemed to pay-off, starting the path towards normalisation with new opportunities for both official and private interests. In sum, Israel's new engagement with the HOA is becoming less strategic-centered while using its geopolitical leverage sourced from its optimal relations with the White House and the anti-Houthi alliance to build relations.

## Conclusion

This article aimed to show how the regional rivalries of the Middle Eastern states have transformed the Red Sea into a new arena of power competition. The main argument is that the security dynamics of the Middle East have overflowed the traditional regional boundaries by affecting the Horn's politics, thus presenting a case of regional insecurity spillover. In parallel, this trend has led to increasingly interconnected and in many cases overlapping security patterns between the two shores of the Red Sea. A scenario is emerging in which the different African stakeholders – Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Sudan/South Sudan, and Somalia – are simultaneously incorporated into systems of alliances within and outside the HOA sub-region. What emerges are open and volatile alliances, in some cases cross-cutting, which are the result of on-going interactions that accentuate the complexity of regional political dynamics and favour further militarisation of the Red Sea. Although African states are not mere passive actors but seek to maximise their benefits from the Middle East competition, they appear to be largely at the mercy of the alliances with their Middle Eastern partners. The more fragile countries, such as Somalia and Sudan, have become a political battlefield among Middle Eastern competitors.

In terms of the traditional identity-politics polarisation (Iran-KSA), the competition within the Sunni world has increased in the wake of the 2011 uprisings with the rise of a new axis based on the Turkish-Qatari alliance. There are now two kinds of intra-Sunni rivalries among the two Sunni blocs (KSA, UAE, Turkey, and Qatar): on the one hand, a competition based on power projection, and another involving the recent efforts to compete in geo-economic diversification. Although KSA and UAE share a desire to limit the rise of Iran in the Horn, their main motivation seems to be the establishment of a precise hierarchy of power within the Sunni world. The Middle Eastern states are investing heavily in infrastructure and civil engineering mega-projects in the hope that their strategy in the Red Sea will be useful to their economic diversification and ability to secure allies' loyalty through partnerships and beneficial agreements.<sup>83</sup>

Iran and Israel are also in the background of these dynamics. The latter has, since 2015, renewed its policy towards Africa by exploiting the growing convergence of interests with the KSA and UAE. However, recent events have shown the first signs of disagreement and strain between the KSA and the UAE over the post-crisis political agenda both in Yemen and Sudan. The UAE seems to have moved 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. On the other hand, Riyadh aims to configure a regional system under its leadership, a sort of wider GCC, in which regimes

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<sup>83</sup> Federico Donelli and Giuseppe Dentice, 'Fluctuating Saudi and Emirati Alignment Behaviours in the Horn of Africa', *International Spectator* (2020): 1–20. doi: 10.1080/03932729.2019.1706389.

led by movements of religious influence can also take place. Finally, Turkey and Qatar are 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, pursue their own geopolitical and economic interests.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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