



# **THE IMPACT OF MIDDLE EAST REGIONAL COMPETITION ON SECURITY AND STABILITY IN THE HORN OF AFRICA**

**GERALD M. FEIERSTEIN**

**AUGUST 2020**  
**POLICY PAPER**



Middle East  
Institute



## CONTENTS

- \* 1 INTRODUCTION
- \* 1 SAUDI COMPETITION WITH IRAN
- \* 3 SAUDI/EMIRATI COMPETITION WITH TURKEY/QATAR
- \* 6 EGYPT'S STRUGGLE TO PRESERVE REGIONAL DOMINANCE  
AND WATER RIGHTS ...
- \* 9 ... COMPETES WITH ETHIOPIA'S RISING REGIONAL ROLE
- \* 10 BEST OF RIVALS: SAUDI COMPETITION WITH THE EMIRATES
- \* 12 CONCLUSION

Cover photo: Somali soldiers marching ahead of trainings held by the Turkish Armed Forces in Mogadishu. *(Photo by Volkan Furuncu/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)*

Contents photo: Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (C) receives Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (L) and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki (R). *(Photo by KARIM SAHIB/AFP via Getty Images)*



## SUMMARY

The relationship between the Middle East and the Horn of Africa is centuries-old and complex. While the world's attention is focused mainly on the "great power competition" in the region, primarily between the U.S. and China, the Horn of Africa has also become a central battleground for influence among competing regional players, principally Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, Qatar, Iran, and Egypt. As they pursue their interests in the region, from Ethiopia and Sudan to Somalia and Djibouti, these competing states are the main drivers of tension and instability in the Horn of Africa.

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the Middle East and the Horn of Africa is centuries-old and complex. "The Red Sea, which is nowhere wider than 355 km, has long connected, rather than separated, the Arabian Peninsula and Northeast Africa," observed Harry Verhoeven. "Geographical proximity," he continued, "underpins a history of relations that have swung back-and-forth between intimate cultural symbiosis and prejudiced animosity that stems from rival imperial expansions and catastrophic violence."<sup>1</sup>

Today, while the world's attention is focused mainly on the "great power competition" in the region, primarily between the U.S. and China, the Horn of Africa has also become a central battleground for influence among several competing regional players:

- Saudi competition with Iran
- Saudi/Emirati competition with Turkey/Qatar
- Egypt's struggle to preserve regional dominance and water rights
- Egypt's competition with Ethiopia's rising regional role
- Saudi competition with the UAE

## SAUDI COMPETITION WITH IRAN

The Horn of Africa emerged as the principal focus for Saudi-Iranian competition on the African continent. It was one of the few regions in the world to have offered the Iranians opportunities to develop relations. Similarly suffering under the weight of international sanctions, several of the states in the region eagerly welcomed Iran's friendship.<sup>2</sup>

Iran's interests in the Horn were mainly directed toward achieving several objectives: 1) accumulating influence in the vicinity of strategic waterways; 2) maximizing its economic and military influence in the region vis-a-vis Saudi Arabia; 3) expanding influence by spreading Shi'ite beliefs; and 4) establishing the Horn as a logistics hub for supporting proxies throughout the region. Most significant<sup>3</sup> among Iran's regional successes, Sudan served as a vital Iranian ally for years. Eritrea and Somalia also proved to be sympathetic partners for Iran. The Iranian navy's access to Eritrean ports was a notable strategic asset for Tehran as it offered a foothold on the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden as well as a strong naval position in Saudi Arabia's backyard.<sup>4</sup>

Had the Iranians been able to sustain the relations, access to Eritrea and Somalia, coupled with control of the Yemeni Red Sea coast through the Houthis, would

have enhanced Iran's ability to threaten international shipping in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a key maritime chokepoint connecting the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. Iranian interest in demonstrating the capacity to challenge shipping in the Red Sea has been apparent in a series of attacks on both military and commercial vessels. Launched from the Yemeni side of the Bab el-Mandeb, the attacks, beginning in 2016 and consisting of both anti-ship missile attacks and so-called drone boats, persist until now.

Recognizing the threat to their interests if Iran were allowed to establish a foothold in the Horn of Africa, Saudi Arabia invested heavily in the effort to counter Iranian influence. The most notable Saudi success was in provoking a break in Sudan's relations with Iran. In 2014, the Sudanese expelled Iranian officials from Khartoum, accusing them of spreading Shi'a Islam through their cultural centers. Khartoum announced, at the same time, that it was joining the Saudi camp. Beyond financial inducements, the Saudis used their diplomatic leverage to entice the Sudanese shift, pledging to help Sudan break out of its diplomatic isolation.<sup>5</sup>

Notably, Sudan's shift to a pro-Saudi stance has persisted even after former President Omar al-Bashir's fall and the significant upheaval in Sudan's governance. While the Iranians appear to have shown some interest in capitalizing on the changed political climate in Khartoum, it is questionable whether they have the capacity to compete financially or diplomatically with the Gulf states.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, diplomatic initiatives aside, it was clearly Saudi Arabia's far greater economic clout, along with its position as the leader of the Sunni Islamic world, that allowed it to succeed in its competition with Iran for influence. In 2016, the Saudis deposited \$1 billion in Sudan's Central Bank, presumably as a reward following Khartoum's decision to break relations with Iran as a result of the attack on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran. The Saudis also used their economic power to strengthen their bilateral ties to Djibouti, Somalia, and Eritrea, all of which cut ties with Iran.<sup>7</sup>

While Iran's traditional influence in the Horn of Africa was once a threat to Saudi Arabia and its interests, recent efforts to increase Saudi involvement in the area have allowed the kingdom to extend its "security belt." Although not yet implemented, the Saudis and Djibouti agreed to the construction of a military base there in 2017. The Saudi-led Red Sea Alliance established in late 2018 is widely seen as directed primarily at deterring regional rivals, especially Iran. With the UAE's military installations in Somaliland and Eritrea, as well as the presence the two share on the Yemeni island of Socotra, the Saudis and Emiratis have largely distanced the region from Iranian influence despite Iran's continued engagement across the Bab el-Mandeb in Yemen through its relationship with the Houthis.



“Sudan’s shift to a pro-Saudi stance has persisted even after former President Omar al-Bashir’s fall and the significant upheaval in Sudan’s governance.” (Photo by Bandar Algaloud/Saudi Kingdom Council/Handout/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)

## SAUDI/EMIRATI COMPETITION WITH TURKEY/QATAR

The intra-GCC conflict that erupted in July 2017 over allegations by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain (later joined by Egypt) of Qatari support for extremist groups has spilled over to the Horn of Africa with negative consequences. Qatar’s decision to withdraw its peacekeeping force from the Djibouti/Eritrea border as a consequence of the two Horn of Africa states’ decision to align with the Saudis and Emiratis quickly led to a new round of fighting.<sup>8</sup> In fact, like Djibouti and Eritrea, most states in the region opted to preserve their relations with the Saudis and Emiratis.

Sudan and Somalia, however, chose to maintain a neutral stance and Turkey’s role as Qatar’s ally has further complicated the picture given Ankara’s major economic and security presence in the region.

**Ethiopia:** As the dominant state in the Horn, strengthening ties to Ethiopia has been a key objective for the competitors. The UAE garnered a great deal of credit for its apparent success in brokering an Ethiopia-Eritrea dialogue, although it has faded recently as Addis Ababa and Asmara are no longer united over their opposition to the Tigray Popular Liberation Front (TPLF).<sup>9</sup> The Emiratis are also playing a positive role in Ethiopia’s economic development, providing investment and balance of payment support. Their assistance with high-profile soft power projects, including

renovation of the presidential palace, has further contributed to their positive standing with the Ethiopian people.<sup>10</sup>

But Ethiopians also credit Turkey for its support. In fact, Turkey is Addis Ababa's largest trading partner and has invested heavily in Ethiopia's light manufacturing sector, notably in textiles.<sup>11</sup> As such, it is well-regarded by the Ethiopian population. Beyond economic cooperation, some Turkish observers see the potential for Turkish-Ethiopian regional cooperation, particularly on Somalia, where Ethiopia's position has evolved and the Turks play a major role, according to a recent Brookings report.<sup>12</sup>

Conversely, Saudi Arabia's involvement in Ethiopia is less well-appreciated. The Saudi decision to deport some 500,000 Ethiopian guest workers is perceived as contributing to homelessness and a rising crime rate in Ethiopia.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Saudi support for Salafist mosques and madrassas has undercut Ethiopia's traditional religious practices, which were more inclined toward Sunni Sufism, and generated criticism by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the importance of Ethiopia in the regional political and economic arenas, neutral Sudan and Somalia have been the main battlegrounds between Saudi Arabia/UAE interests and Turkey/Qatar.

**Sudan:** Like Saudi Arabia, Turkey had built close ties to former President al-Bashir and had pursued a policy in Sudan viewed by some observers as "neo-Ottoman." In that vein, Turkish President Recep Tayyip

Erdogan, on a visit to Sudan, committed to rebuilding Suakin Island, a historic Ottoman trading post on Sudan's Red Sea coast. The proposed \$650 million investment included plans to expand Turkish-Sudanese military cooperation and build a docking facility for military and civilian purposes. The plan stoked Egyptian and Gulf concerns that Turkey was seeking to establish a military base in the Red Sea.<sup>15</sup> But Turkey's engagement suffered a blow with al-Bashir's ouster and the ensuing political chaos in Khartoum. The popular uprising left the Turks in a dilemma, forced to choose between backing their ally al-Bashir and supporting the demands of the Sudanese people.<sup>16</sup>

The setback for the Turks appeared to open the door for a greater Saudi/Emirati role. Although the Saudis and Emiratis seemed to hold the stronger cards in Sudan at the beginning of the political uprising, they have also faced significant push-back. African Union (AU) observers in mid-2019 argued that the Saudis and Emiratis were playing a "spoiler role" in Khartoum.<sup>17</sup> The allegation apparently links to a visit to the UAE by Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, then leading Sudan's junta. While in Abu Dhabi, al-Burhan secured \$3 billion in assistance from the Saudis and Emiratis, intended, according to press reports, "to preserve Sudan's security and stability."<sup>18</sup> A secondary objective, according to regional observers, was the elimination of Muslim Brotherhood elements, i.e., pro-Turkish groups. The pledged aid untracked ongoing negotiations between the military and civilians.<sup>19</sup> It reinforced suspicions that

the Gulf states, with Egypt, were intent on promoting a new military dictatorship in Khartoum, perhaps under the leadership of al-Burhan's deputy, Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemeti), who once led the notorious Janjaweed militia in Darfur. Until now, that goal has been stymied by strong popular opposition, which forced the military to accept a power-sharing agreement with the civilians. But the transition is far from complete, there have been setbacks, and the Saudis and Emiratis, along with the Egyptians, may still prefer to throw their support to a new Sudanese strongman.<sup>20</sup>

**Somalia:** Even more than Sudan, the fallout from the intra-GCC dispute and the competition between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on the one hand, and Turkey and Qatar, on the other hand, has had a negative impact on the situation in Somalia and has contributed to its centrifugal pressures.<sup>21</sup>

Turkey has been one of the most prominent actors in Somalia and has garnered credit from Somalis for its long-standing support and deployment of soft power. The modern growth in Turkey's engagement with Somalia began in 2011, when Somalia was hit with a devastating famine. Expanding on its humanitarian intervention, the Turkish-Somali relationship further grew to include development assistance, schools, and institutional capacity-building programs. In 2017, Turkey further expanded its relations with Mogadishu to include Turkey's first overseas military base, now housing some 200 Turkish troops, and provide military training to Somali government troops.

Today, Turkey's relations with Somalia are robust, including operating ports and airports, development of its export markets, and regular air links operated by Turkish Airlines. The Turks pride themselves that their relations with Somalia are broader than the "paycheck diplomacy" practiced by their Gulf rivals.<sup>22</sup>

While Saudi interest in Somalia was mostly in the context of its competition with, and concern about, Iranian interventions, the UAE presence there historically was mostly focused on business and commercial interests. Thus, the UAE's promotion of Somali stability was linked to private sector investment. Emirati commercial presence was most apparent through Emirati maritime businesses, notably Dubai Ports World (DP World), engaged in developing Somali seaports, including Berbera and Bosaso. Much of the bilateral UAE-Somali private sector activity is handled by a large Somali expatriate community based in Dubai.<sup>23</sup>

Although the Saudis and Emiratis did not initially view Turkey as a strategic competitor in the Horn, that began to change when Ankara aligned with Doha in the intra-GCC dispute and increased its pursuit of military relations with like-minded states in the region. In fact, the Turkish-Qatari presence in the Horn of Africa is far more challenging to the Saudis and Emiratis than was Iran's. This growing competition has played out in ways that have been damaging to Somalia's political process. While the central government in Mogadishu has supported Turkey and Qatar, five of Somalia's six

federal states (Somaliland, Puntland, Hirshabelle, Galmudug, and Southwest) have challenged the government's position and advocated for a pro-Saudi stance. These conflicting views have generated tensions within Somalia's political classes.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, Emirati investment in the ports of Berbera, which now includes a military component, and Bosaso have further roiled the relationship between Mogadishu and the states of Somaliland and Puntland. In 2018, Somaliland signed an agreement with DP World to run the port at Berbera as well as invest \$440 million in port expansion. The Somali Parliament subsequently voided the agreement and ordered DP World to be expelled from the country.<sup>25</sup> Qatari-Emirati friction was also apparently the impetus behind a bizarre alleged assassination plot in 2019 financed by a Qatari businessman aimed at forcing Dubai business interests to flee Bosaso.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the Emirati pursuit of relations with Somaliland and Puntland independent of the central government in Mogadishu threatens to undermine efforts to reunify the country.

## **EGYPT'S STRUGGLE TO PRESERVE REGIONAL DOMINANCE AND WATER RIGHTS ...**

Among regional actors, most international attention has been focused on the interplay of competing interests among the Saudis,

Emiratis, Qataris, and Turks. But Egypt, too, has critical interests at stake in the Horn of Africa and has historically considered the African Red Sea coast to be within its sphere of influence. The pursuit of Egypt's national interest has placed it alternatively in cooperation with its Gulf partners and in competition with them.

Egypt's current interests in the Horn focus on two issues: Sudan's political transition and the development of Ethiopia's Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project.

**Sudan:** Egyptian interests in Sudan largely align with those of its Gulf partners. Like the UAE and Saudi Arabia, Egypt supported the regime of former President al-Bashir and has been seen as supportive of the military junta led by Gen. al-Burhan. When talks between the military and civilians in Khartoum broke down in mid-2019, President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi welcomed al-Burhan to Cairo. Although el-Sisi pledged to honor "the will of the Sudanese people," he likely sees the continuation of military rule in Khartoum to be a bulwark against Islamism and a reliable partner in securing the Egyptian-Sudanese border.<sup>27</sup> While leaving the issue of financial support to the Sudanese military to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Egypt has pursued diplomatic initiatives to help the military. While chair of the AU, Egypt intervened in 2019 to extend the bloc's 15-day deadline for a handover to civilian rule to three months.<sup>28</sup> Like Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, Cairo under el-Sisi may be prepared at the right moment to throw its support behind al-Burhan's deputy, Lt. Gen. Dagalo, as the new Sudanese strongman.

Egypt likely sees Sudanese support for its position on the GERD as being similarly crucial for its national security interests. Potential friction over the dam has been a source of bilateral tension. Growing cooperation among Egypt, the UAE, and Eritrea triggered a comment by Sudan's assistant president, Ibrahim Mahmoud Hamid, warning of "potential security threats from Egypt and Eritrea" in response to reports of an Egyptian military presence in Eritrea.<sup>29</sup> Egyptian concerns about Sudan's position would have been further reinforced by Sudan's surprise move at an early March 2020 Arab League meeting in Cairo to demand that its name be removed from a League resolution supporting Egypt in the GERD negotiations and declaring that "Egyptian water security is an integral part of Arab national security." Evidence

of Sudanese "bias" toward the Ethiopian position on the GERD at the Arab League meeting followed on Sudan's decision to join with Ethiopia in refusing to sign a draft agreement on the dam in February negotiated by the U.S. Treasury and supported by Cairo.<sup>30</sup>

**Ethiopia:** Tensions between Cairo and Khartoum over their respective positions on the GERD point to the centrality of that Ethiopian project to Egypt's evaluation of its national security requirements. Unsurprisingly, the issue of Nile waters leads the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' webpage on Egyptian relations with Africa, according to Yasmine Farouk, as the potential diversion of water will have crippling economic, environmental, and social consequences.<sup>31</sup> The debate over the equitable distribution



"Despite its view that the potential drop in access to Nile waters is an existential threat to Egypt's well-being, Cairo has few options in changing Ethiopia's course." (Photo by EDUARDO SOTERAS/AFP via Getty Images)

of the Nile waters has divided the upper riparian states, led by Ethiopia, from the lower riparian states, led by Egypt, for decades. In fact, as reported by Abadir Ibrahim, "Due to Egypt's monopoly over the Nile and the fact that Ethiopia is the most voluminous contributor to the waters of the Nile, the realpolitik of the river has mostly been played out between the two states and to some extent with Sudan."<sup>32</sup>

Efforts to break Egypt's hegemonic control over the Nile were evident in the negotiations earlier in the 2000s to establish the Nile Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement, which was signed at Entebbe in 2011. Egypt, Sudan, and the Congo were the only three holdouts among the riparian states. The Egyptians are reportedly concerned that Sudan might opt to sign on to the agreement as well. Despite the agreement, however, Ibrahim argued at the time that "the only way Egypt could lose its negotiating power and usher in an era of balanced power is if the counter-hegemonic narrative is reinforced by a credible threat to develop the waters of the Nile, independent of Egypt's input and control."<sup>33</sup> The GERD would pose precisely that threatening development for Egypt's security interests. Moreover, from an Egyptian perspective, the Ethiopian decision to move ahead with the project was timed to take advantage of Egypt's domestic political upheaval in the 2011-13 Arab Spring timeframe, reinforcing Cairo's perspective that Addis Ababa was acting in bad faith.

Despite its view that the potential drop in access to Nile waters is an existential threat to Egypt's well-being, Cairo has few options in changing Ethiopia's course. Costantinos Berhutesfa Costantinos, a professor at Addis Ababa University and senior policy advisor at the UN, argued that the Egyptians don't have a military option, as the dam site is beyond the reach of the Egyptian air force.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, despite the strong Arab League resolution in favor of Egypt's position on the GERD, the issue of Nile waters is one where the Egyptians cannot be confident of Gulf support. Going beyond their view of the Red Sea and Horn of Africa from a political and security optic, the Saudis and Emiratis see the region as an essential pillar of their food security strategy. They have invested heavily in the purchase of East African agricultural land, especially in Ethiopia and Sudan, and would see the build-out of Ethiopia's hydropower potential as a net plus in the region's development. Possible ambivalence in the Saudi position alarmed Cairo in 2016 when a Saudi delegation led by Ahmed al-Khateeb, a senior advisor at the Saudi royal court and board chairman of the Saudi Fund for Development, visited the dam site and discussed the project with Ethiopia's prime minister. The Saudi visit drew a strong rebuke from the Egyptians and presumably has not been replicated. Nevertheless, it does underline the reality that Egyptian and Gulf perspectives on the dam may not be perfectly aligned.<sup>35</sup>

Reflecting its lack of options, Egyptian policy has emphasized peaceful resolution of the issue despite the worries of some

experts that its position will lead to a military confrontation. Indeed, President el-Sisi has avoided making direct military threats in his speeches and statements. Instead, Egypt has moved from a hardline position rejecting the dam altogether, accompanied by assertions of the “inviolability of Egypt’s water share,” to attempting to negotiate an agreement. In particular, Egypt has sought Ethiopia’s acquiescence on two key points, according to Yasmine Farouk: 1) the timeframe and dates of the filling phase; and 2) implementation of an objective study of the dam’s economic, social, and environmental impacts.<sup>36</sup> Egypt has also pursued broader cooperation with its regional rival. Its appeal to the U.S. for mediation is the latest and, as yet, unsuccessful effort to reach a political agreement with Ethiopia on the dam.

## ... COMPETES WITH ETHIOPIA’S RISING REGIONAL ROLE

Tensions in the Egyptian-Ethiopian relationship over the GERD fall against a backdrop of rising Ethiopian confidence in its role as the dominant power in the Horn of Africa. As an aspiring regional hegemon, along with Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE, Ethiopia is “recasting the geography of security in the broader macro-region,” writes Harry Verhoeven.<sup>37</sup> Ethiopia is one of the few African countries with a clearly

articulated foreign policy, according to the Institute for Strategic Studies in Addis Ababa.<sup>38</sup>

Like its fellow potential hegemons, the foreign policy of Ethiopia is shaped by its domestic political and economic considerations. In particular, the Ethiopians worry that their efforts at statebuilding will be undermined by regional instability. “Ethiopia sits at the center of a rough neighborhood,” observed Professor Costantinos. Surrounded by Somalia, Sudan, and Eritrea, Ethiopia has reason for worry. The potential for a dramatic security crisis cannot be ruled out.<sup>39</sup> For that reason, wrote Verhoeven, “Addis has sought to build a regional order, multilateralising its foreign policy through IGAD where it can”—referring to the eight-country Intergovernmental Authority on Development trade bloc — “but acting through military intervention and bilateral diplomacy when deemed necessary to safeguard its vital interests.”<sup>40</sup> Unsurprisingly, therefore, Ethiopia has promoted closer military cooperation with the U.S. and has announced its intent to re-launch its navy.<sup>41</sup>

The spillover effect of security issues from across the Red Sea, whether tensions with Iran or the intra-GCC dispute, has further complicated Ethiopia’s foreign policy interests. While Prime Minister Ahmed has sought to keep Ethiopia at a distance from these larger regional competitions, pragmatically pursuing what is best for Ethiopia, the reality is that the states of the

Arabian Peninsula no longer see the Horn as an external actor but consider it an integral part of their own security perimeter.

Not all of the effects are negative, of course. The role that the UAE played in brokering a reduction in Ethiopian-Eritrean tensions is a reflection of Abu Dhabi's growing influence in Asmara. Nevertheless, the inflow of Gulf political, economic, and security power in the region has served to strengthen the position of Eritrea and Sudan, partners with the Saudis and the UAE in Yemen, vis-a-vis Ethiopia and undercut Addis Ababa's efforts to promote its regional leadership, sustain Eritrea's political and diplomatic isolation, and pursue its policy of military containment.<sup>42</sup>

"The fact that Ethiopia and the Gulf states have such different political cultures and a history of distrust and confrontation," Verhoeven concludes, "is especially worrying."<sup>43</sup>

## **BEST OF RIVALS: SAUDI COMPETITION WITH THE EMIRATES**

For the most part, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have worked together closely on issues of mutual security concern in the Red Sea region. They coordinated on shared initiatives to push back on Iranian inroads in the Horn of Africa. They have shared efforts to ensure that the outcome of political upheaval in Sudan preserves

their security interests. They have worked together on responses to the growing Turkish/Qatari presence in the region, including expanding military cooperation in Somalia and Eritrea, which links, also, to their campaign to defeat the pro-Iranian Houthi insurgency in Yemen.

Nevertheless, there have been stresses and strains even in this close alliance. These strains have been especially evident in the Yemen conflict where Emirati intervention in Yemeni internal affairs has proven problematic for the Saudis. On two occasions, in January 2018 and again in July-August 2019, where tensions between the Hadi government and UAE-backed southern Yemeni elements erupted into open conflict, the Saudis were compelled to intervene to force an end to the fighting and reiteration of the Yemenis' commitment to remain engaged in the counter-insurgency campaign. Similarly, when the Emirates challenged Yemeni sovereign control of Socotra island, at the southern entrance to the Red Sea, the Saudis were again forced to intervene to force the Emiratis to back off. The situation on Socotra today remains murky as both Saudi and Emirati military forces maintain a presence on the island.<sup>44</sup>

Saudi-Emirati competition in Yemen also reflects the possibility of a larger divergence of their national interests in the region. While Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen is largely driven by defensive concerns about its own security, the UAE appears to see Yemen as part of a larger project to assert its interests throughout the Red Sea region. The growth in Emirati



## Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Arab and African Countries bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden

هـ - الموافق ٦ يناير ٢٠٢٠م  
Riyadh, 11<sup>th</sup> Jumada al-  
al-  
al-  
al-

assertiveness is a reflection of the change in internal dynamics within the Emirates itself, according to Verhoeven, as Abu Dhabi secures its position as the dominant emirate. "The Emirati objective is not total dominance of the Gulf ... but rather strategic parity with Riyadh and a geo-economic dominance of the Western Indian Ocean. This macro-region is essential to the UAE's prosperity and its security, given its strong dependence on maritime trade and Dubai's role as a hub for commerce with and in South Asia, North Africa, and the Horn."<sup>45</sup>

The UAE expansion into the Red Sea is a source of worry for Saudi Arabia and there are indications that the Saudis have begun to push back against perceived Emirati gains. In addition to their efforts to control the situation in Yemen, in 2016, the Saudis pressured Egypt to return

sovereign control of the tiny islands of Tiran and Sanafir at the northern end of the Red Sea. The Saudis had acquiesced in their occupation by Egypt since the early 1950s.<sup>46</sup> The most tangible evidence of a more muscular Saudi presence in the Red Sea region came in late 2018 when the Saudis engineered a new Red Sea alliance composed of six countries bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, in addition to the Saudis, including Egypt, Djibouti, Somalia, Yemen, and Jordan. The UAE was notably not included in the new Saudi initiative, whose purpose was vague. Then-Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Jubeir noted that the principal purpose of the new organization would be "to stabilize the region," although he did not rule out the possibility that it might include a security component.<sup>47</sup>

# Ministers of the Arab and African Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden

الرياض - ١١ جمادى الأولى ١٤٤١  
Riyadh 1441 H- 6<sup>th</sup> January 2020



## CONCLUSION

The growing militarization of the Red Sea region has generated a great deal of interest in the area as a new nexus of great power competition, especially between the United States and China. Nevertheless, it's clear that the main drivers of tension and instability in the Horn of Africa are the regional competitors vying for influence and control. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, Qatar, Iran, and Egypt have all pursued their interests in the region and have exported their conflicts to the Horn of Africa. Even among states that share common interests, notably Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt, differences have occasionally outweighed policy agreements. Having recognized that growing Iranian influence, especially

in Yemen, Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia, threatened the encirclement of the Gulf monarchies by a ring of hostile, pro-Iranian states, the Saudis and Emiratis successfully pushed back and outbid the Iranians for Horn of Africa loyalties. But Turkey and Qatar have proven to be more agile competitors and their political, economic, and security influence in the region has proven to be more durable. The result has often been an unhealthy race for domination in the region, reinforcing internal instability, especially in Sudan and Somalia. Meanwhile, Egypt's existential fear of a loss of control over the Nile River clashes with Ethiopia's role as a rising, and increasingly self-confident, regional power.

For the most part, these regional conflicts have fallen outside the notice or engagement of international powers. As

Alex Rondos, the EU special representative to the Horn of Africa from 2009-11, noted: "A well-established multi-country naval coalition patrols the sea lanes off Somalia's coast to combat piracy, but no international political mechanism currently exists to diffuse a regional crisis."<sup>48</sup> There has been some European engagement in the Horn, primarily in Ethiopia. The French have provided a mixed package of grants and loans. The Norwegians have been somewhat engaged in the energy sector.

Even the U.S. has been largely disengaged from the regional competition. As Amb. David Shinn has noted, "The fact remains that Sub-Saharan Africa, including the Horn, is far down the U.S. priority list."<sup>49</sup> To the extent that U.S. interests are engaged, it has largely outsourced policy leadership to Gulf partners. This has been particularly true regarding efforts to constrain and then eliminate Iran's influence in the region. Controversially, the U.S. has supported the Saudi-led coalition's military intervention in Yemen to prevent the pro-Iranian Houthi forces from seizing control there and threatening Saudi security. The U.S. was also sympathetic to Saudi efforts to rehabilitate former President al-Bashir as part of its campaign to wean Sudan away from its relationship with Iran. Even in those instances where Gulf actions conflict with U.S. policy preferences — support for civilian rule in Khartoum or the re-assertion of central government control in Somalia — the U.S. has done little to pressure Gulf partners to follow Washington's lead.

Thus, the likelihood is that regional actors will continue to see the Horn of Africa as both a key battleground and a major opportunity to expand their political, economic, and security interests in the broader Middle East.

# ENDNOTES

1. Harry Verhoeven, "The Gulf and the Horn: Changing Geographies of Security Interdependence and Competing Visions of Regional Order," in *Civil Wars* (Routledge, 2018), 338.
2. Gerald Feierstein and Craig Greathead, "Africa Becomes the New Focus of Saudi-Iranian Regional Rivalry," (Middle East Institute, 2017), 1.
3. Dr. Shady Ahmed Mohammed Abdelwahab Mansour, "Saudi Arabia and UAE in the Horn of Africa: Containing Security Threats from Regional Rivals," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* Volume 12, No. 3 (September 2019).
4. Feierstein and Greathead, op. cit. 1.
5. Feierstein and Greathead, op. cit. 2.
6. Giorgio Cafiero, "Is a Sudanese-Iranian Rapprochement Possible," (Middle East Institute, May 9, 2019).
7. Feierstein and Greathead, op. cit. 2.
8. Aaron Maasho, "Djibouti, Eritrea in Territorial Dispute After Qatar Peacekeepers Leave," (Reuters, June 16, 2017).
9. Author's Notes, Center for Dialogue, Research, and Cooperation, June 21, 2019.
10. Author's Notes, Institute for Security Studies, Addis Ababa, June 21, 2019.
11. Author's Notes, Institute for Strategic Affairs, Addis Ababa, June 20, 2019.
12. Zach Vertin, "Turkey and the New Scramble for Africa: Ottoman Designs or Unfounded Fears?" (Brookings, May 19, 2019).
13. Author's Note, U.S. Embassy Addis Ababa, June 20, 2019.
14. Author's Notes, Institute for Security Studies, June 21, 2019.
15. Vertin, "Turkey and the New Scramble for Africa."
16. Ibid.
17. Author's Notes, African Union Peace and Security Committee, June 21, 2019.
18. Simon Tisdall, "Sudan: How Arab Autocrats Conspired to Thwart Reformists' Hopes," (The Guardian, June 3, 2019).
19. Author's Notes, UN Office of the Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa, June 20, 2019.
20. Kenneth Roth, "Sudan Has a Window of Opportunity. The West Shouldn't Squander It." (Human Rights Watch, March 20, 2020).
21. Author's Notes, African Union Peace and Security Committee, June 21, 2019.
22. Vertin, "Turkey and the New Scramble for Africa."
23. Dr. Mehari Taddele Maru, "The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Its Relations with the Horn of Africa," 8.
24. Abdinor Hassan Dahir, "Horn of Africa Caught Between the Qatar-GCC Crisis: Case Studies of Somalia and Sudan," (TRT World Research Center, March 2018), 12.

25. Ibid. 13.
26. Ronen Bergman and David D. Kirkpatrick, "With Guns, Cash, and Terrorism, Gulf States Vie for Power in Somalia," (New York Times, July 22, 2019).
27. Tisdall, "Sudan: How Arab Autocrats Conspired to Thwart Reformists' Hopes."
28. Ibid.
29. Mansour, "Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Horn of Africa." 18.
30. Shahira Amin, "Egypt Alarmed Over Sudan's Siding with Ethiopia in Nile Water Dispute, (Al-Monitor, March 13, 2020).
31. Yasmine Farouk, "The Incomplete Restructuring of Egypt's African Policy," (Fondation pour la Recherche Strategique, May 4, 2018), 4.
32. Abadir M. Ibrahim, "The Nile Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement: The Beginning of the End of Egyptian Hydro-Political Hegemony," *Missouri Environmental Law and Policy Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Spring 2011), 289.
33. Ibid. 313.
34. Costantinos Berhutesfa Costantinos, "The Horn of Africa and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Martial and Security Scenarios, (Public Lecture: Respublica Literaria, 2016).
35. Egypt-Gulf Relations Tested by Saudi Visit to Ethiopia Dam. (Middle East Eye, December 20, 2016).
36. Farouk, "The Incomplete Restructuring of Egypt's Africa Policy."
37. Verhoeven, "The Gulf and the Horn," 334.
38. Author's Notes, Institute for Strategic Studies.
39. Costantinos, "The Horn of Africa and the Gulf Cooperation Council, 6.
40. Verhoeven, "The Gulf and the Horn," 349.
41. Author's Notes, U.S. Embassy Addis Ababa.
42. Mansour, "Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Horn of Africa."
43. Verhoeven, 351.
44. Gerald Feierstein, "Implications of the War in Yemen on the Gulf Region's Security," *The Dilemma of Security and Defense in the Gulf Region*, (Gulf International Forum, 2019), 175.
45. Verhoeven, 350.
46. Declan Walsh, "Despite Public Outcry, Egypt to Transfer Islands to Saudi Arabia," (New York Times, June 14, 2017).
47. Dr. Shady Abdelwahab, "Red Sea Alliance: Containing Threats in a Turbulent Regional Order," (Future for Advanced Research and Studies, December 26, 2018).
48. Costantinos, 7.
49. David Shinn, "U.S. Policy in the Horn of Africa," (Middle East Institute, March 2020), 1.

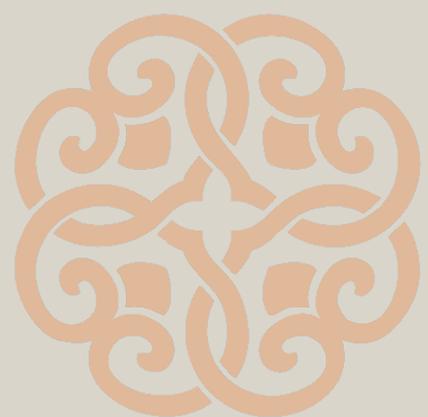
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amb. (ret.) Gerald Feierstein is senior vice president at MEI. He retired from the U.S. Foreign Service in May 2016 after a 41-year career with the personal rank of Career Minister. As a diplomat he served in nine overseas postings, including three tours of duty in Pakistan, as well as assignments in Saudi Arabia, Oman, Lebanon, Jerusalem, and Tunisia. In 2010, President Obama appointed Amb. Feierstein U.S. Ambassador to Yemen, where he served until 2013. From 2013 until his retirement, Amb. Feierstein was Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.

In addition to his career-long focus on the Near East and South Asia, Amb. Feierstein also played a prominent role in developing and implementing State Department policies and programs to counter violent extremism. As Deputy Coordinator and Principal Deputy Coordinator in the State Department's Counter-Terrorism bureau, Amb. Feierstein led the development of initiatives to build regional networks to confront extremist groups as well as to counter terrorist financing and promote counter-terrorism messaging. He continued to focus on defeating terrorist groups through his subsequent tours as Deputy Chief of Mission in Pakistan and as Ambassador to Yemen.

## ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE

The Middle East Institute is a center of knowledge dedicated to narrowing divides between the peoples of the Middle East and the United States. With over 70 years' experience, MEI has established itself as a credible, non-partisan source of insight and policy analysis on all matters concerning the Middle East. MEI is distinguished by its holistic approach to the region and its deep understanding of the Middle East's political, economic and cultural contexts. Through the collaborative work of its three centers — Policy & Research, Arts & Culture and Education — MEI provides current and future leaders with the resources necessary to build a future of mutual understanding.



[WWW.MEI.EDU](http://WWW.MEI.EDU)



Middle East  
Institute