

## Geo-Politics in the Horn of Africa

By Hisham Aidi

### Abstract

“The Great Game”, as it has been called, has been playing out in the region, layering new rivalries and ideological quarrels, onto preexisting post-colonial conflicts that have yet to be resolved. Berbera is again a point of interest. In 2018, the United Arab Emirates put down \$450 million to develop Berbera’s port, as part of an effort to counter Qatari, Turkish and Russian influence in the region.

A new security competition is underway in the Horn of Africa involving the Gulf states, Turkey, and Iran, as well as China, Russia and the United States. The strategic situation should be understood as an extension of two Middle Eastern power struggles. The Saudi/Iranian conflict, on the one hand, and the intra-Gulf quarrel (pitting Saudi Arabia and UAE against Qatar and Turkey), on the other, are playing out across the Red Sea, as Gulf states have come to see the Somali coastline as their “western security flank.” These two struggles - driven by security considerations and commercial interests - and aggravated by the global warming and food and water insecurity - have prompted a political realignment in Africa, and spurred a wave of investment in ports, bases and infrastructure in Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti and Eritrea. The security competition in the Horn is also unfolding against the backdrop of China’s expansion into Africa, and two ongoing democratic experiments in Ethiopia and Sudan.

## Background

The Gulf states have longstanding cultural and commercial ties to the Horn of Africa. When Saudi analysts discuss their kingdom's current interest in Africa, they allude to the era of King Faisal (1864-1975) who established the Saudi Fund for Development that offered assistance to Chad, Somalia and the Sudan. In line with the US's Cold War policy, Faisal also supported opposition movements (like the Eritrean independence movement) that fought Soviet-sponsored regimes in East Africa. With the end of the Cold War, Saudi Arabia all but lost interest in Africa, but when King Salman assumed the throne in 2015, the African continent returned to the "priority list" for three reasons: 1/ Riyadh was looking for new theatres to push back against Iranian influence; 2/ with the war in Yemen, Saudi Arabia was seeking strategic depth by building alliances along the Red Sea corridor; and 3/ Salman aims to make Saudi Arabia a G20 economy, a global player with a special leadership role among Muslim populations.<sup>1</sup> Worth underscoring also that nowadays the Gulf states are home to sizeable migrant communities that send remittances to Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia. In 2017, Saudi Arabia alone was the source of some \$191 million in remittances of a total of \$816 million to Ethiopia and, \$71 million of a total of \$177 million to Sudan.<sup>2</sup>

Qatar began to play a role in the Horn initially as a mediator during the Darfur conflict in the mid-2000s. After the crisis with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi erupted in June 2017, Qatar was increasingly isolated as Mauritania, Senegal, Chad, Gabon, Niger, Djibouti and Eritrea sided with the Saudi-Emirati axis and downgraded diplomatic relations with Doha. Qatar in turn promptly withdrew its peacekeeping troops from the disputed Djibouti-Eritrea border. Shortly thereafter Doha launched a diplomatic initiative targeting West Africa as the Emirates already had strong ties with Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan and Kenya. In December 2017, the Qatari emir traveled to Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana opening several embassies. After June 2017, Qatar began acquiring land in Sudan and Ethiopia to shore up its food security.

Turkey, Qatar's closest ally, was one of the earliest investors in Somalia. During the famine of 2011, Turkey was offering humanitarian aid – with civil society

organizations building schools and hospitals – and with the retreat of the Shabaab from Mogadishu in 2011, Turkish businesses began appearing. In 2011, Erdogan visited Mogadishu – the first non-African leader to visit since George Bush in 1993. Following this, Turkey reopened its foreign embassy, establishing full diplomatic relations with the Federal Government of Somalia in August 2012. Turkish government agencies – and companies that were building low-cost infrastructure projects in a number of African states - began building roads and irrigation systems in Somalia, and even renovated the Somali parliament building, damaged in an attack by Al Shabaab in 2014. It is worth noting that Turkey played a prominent role in 2015 in the Saudi-led coalition to contain the Houthi rebels in Yemen who were advancing southward to Bab El Mandab, a chokepoint for global trade at the entrance of the Red Sea. Turkey – and the Gulf states – are scrambling to gain a foothold in the Horn of Africa, which they view as an entry to the wider continent and its markets. Ankara in particular sees China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an opportunity to build closer ties with Beijing.

The following lecture will examine this Middle Eastern scramble for the Horn looking at four issues: 1/ Red Sea ports and bases, 2/ Nile water distribution 3/ Somalia's fragile statehood and 4/the democratic experiments underway in Sudan and Ethiopia.

## Ports & Bases

Since 2010, Middle Eastern and Asian states, maneuvering for greater access to the Red Sea, have spent billions of dollars acquiring ports and land to build military bases.<sup>3</sup> Turkey is developing Suakin Island, a former Ottoman outpost in the Sudan. Qatar is investing \$4 billion nearby to develop a port from whence a ferry can journey from the Sudanese mainland to the Saudi port of Jeddah. Doha also recently announced that it will build a new seaport in Hobyo, Somalia, in the central region of Mudug. The port of Mogadishu has been administered by Turkey since 2014.

Before 2009, only the US and France had military bases in the Horn of Africa. In 2009, Italy set up a base in Djibouti

1. International Crisis Group, *Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact Report # 206*, Brussels (September 19 2019)

2. "Bilateral Remittance Matrix 2017," World Bank Migration and Remittances Group, Published April 2018.

3. The Red Sea gives way to the Suez Canal, which handles about 10 percent of the world's trade, including 10 percent of the world's oil trade per the United Nations and the US Energy Information Administration "Middle East Power Struggle Plays Out on New Stage," *The Wall Street Journal*, (June 1, 2018)

to deal with the piracy problem that had worsened over the 2000s.<sup>4</sup> In 2011, the Japanese Self-Defense Force leased a 12-hectare area in Djibouti, next to the American base of Camp Lemonnier, which it is now expanding into a base, the Asian state's first overseas base since World War II. Riyadh is building bases in Djibouti and Eritrea. In 2016, Djibouti a close ally of Riyadh, severed ties with Tehran, and authorized the construction of a Saudi military base.<sup>5</sup> UAE is building a base in Somaliland, the breakaway province in northern Somalia. If Qatar and Turkey are close to the central government in Mogadishu,<sup>6</sup> UAE as mentioned, is investing heavily in Somaliland and in the semi-autonomous province of Puntland – having signed a \$336 million contract to expand the port of Bosaso. The UAE in turn has built a base in Assab, Eritrea. In 2015, King Salman signed a 30-year agreement with the Eritrean president Afewerki to base the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) operations in Eritrea – from which to launch military forays into Yemen. Meanwhile, Russia – since hosting the Russian-African summit in October – has been in negotiations with the Central African Republic to host a Russian military base on the continent.<sup>7</sup>

## Food & Water

The Nile is also a coveted resource for the Gulf states and “upriver” countries interested in tapping the river for water and electricity. Access to the Nile's waters has been governed by the Nile Waters Agreement of 1929, signed between Egypt and Britain, which at the time, represented Uganda, Kenya, Tanganyika (now Tanzania) and Sudan.<sup>8</sup> The document gave Cairo the lion's share of the river's waters, and also the right to veto projects higher up the Nile that would affect Egypt's share of water. In 1959, an accord between Egypt and Sudan, building on the previous agreement, gave Egypt the right to 55.5 billion cubic meters of Nile water a year and Sudan 18.5 billion cubic meters per year. Today upriver countries are seeking to overturn this colonial arrangement. This is

4. Bruno Maçães, “The most valuable military real estate in the world,” Politico.eu (January 15 2018)

5. “Djibouti severs diplomatic ties with Iran,” The Economist Intelligence Unit (January 11 2016)

6. “Middle East's power struggle moves to the Horn of Africa,” The Financial Times (June 29 2019)

7. “Central African Republic considers hosting Russian military base,” The Guardian (October 25 2019)

8. Pierre Crabitès, “The Nile Waters Agreement” Foreign Affairs (October 1929)

happening as China and the Gulf states are expanding into the Nile Valley, building dams to generate electricity and irrigate industrial farms to produce crops for export to the Middle East and China.<sup>9</sup> One point of conflict is the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam now under construction by the Ethiopian government on the Blue Nile (in Lake Tana, in northwest Ethiopia.) The \$4.2 billion dam, which will be partly financed by China, will not be supplying water for farms or cities, but its enormous reservoir will still affect the flow of water. Egypt in particular is worried about how a rapid construction of the reservoir could reduce its water supply. In 2017, Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi has called the dam “a matter of life and death.” An Ethiopian official in turn has declared that “any move that does not respect Ethiopia's sovereignty and its right to use the Nile dam has no acceptance.”<sup>10</sup>

To shore up its water and food supply, Sudan – under Bashir – turned to Saudi Arabia for investment.<sup>11</sup> Riyadh had begun growing wheat in Sudan – investing \$13 billion in 2015 alone – one third of all foreign investment in Sudan, according to a report by the Oxford Business Group. Gulf states have also invested in Egypt, pouring money into the Toshka Project, west of the Aswan High Dam. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have bid for Sisi's new project to expand arable land by 1.5 million acres, in part by drawing on the Nubian aquifer, the world's largest aquifer system which lies at the eastern end of the Sahara, beneath the borders of Sudan, Chad, Libya and Egypt.

## State Fragility

One of the reigning theses in the study of African politics today is that African states rarely go to war against each other because they lack the capacity to control their territories and can rarely project power across borders. Thus, state weakness, combined with the influence of the OAU's 1964 resolution – the so-called Cairo Declaration – on the inviolability of colonial borders, has meant that there have been few border wars in Africa, only two successful secessions (Eritrea and South Sudan), and

9. “Farming the World: China's Epic Race to Avoid a Food Crisis,” Bloomberg (May 22 2017)

10. “Food Is the Ultimate Power”: Parched Countries Tap the Nile,” The Wall Street Journal (November 24 2019)

11. Harry Verhoeven, “African dam building as extraversion: The case of Sudan's dam programme, Nubian resistance, and the Saudi-Iranian proxy war in Yemen,” African Affairs. (July 2016) ,

only two regime change invasions (Tanzania's unseating of Uganda's Idi Amin in 1979 and Libya's invasion of Chad in 1980-1981). Yet as an exhaustive study in the *Journal of African Studies* recently showed, inter-state conflict still takes place in Africa but through proxy war. Since 1960, only 30 percent of African conflicts were "internal" and the remainder a mixture of "internationalized internal" and "interstate:" "fully 70 percent were actually internationalized in one way or another."<sup>12</sup> In the Horn of Africa, for instance, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Ethiopia and Sudan regularly sent forces into each other's territories. As scholar Alex de Waal observes, the SPLA fought against Oromo rebels inside Ethiopia in the 1980s, while the Eritrean People's Liberation Front repelled an SPLA operation inside Sudan's Blue Nile in 1990.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, as Middle Eastern states gain a foothold in the Horn, rivalries are playing out in East Africa through proxies. The peace in Somalia is precarious, maintained by an African Union mission made up of mostly Kenyan and Ethiopian troops, countries that have intervened in the past in Somalia. Since 2012, Somalia has been divided into federal states ruled by a Mogadishu-based central government. It's unclear how this equilibrium will be affected by the flow of rents from Gulf states. The government in Mogadishu is supported by Turkey and Qatar. Somaliland which declared independence in 1991 and is hoping to secede, has sought aid and investment from UAE – an alliance Mogadishu views as problematic, if not illegal. Analysts fear that Gulf power struggles playing out in Somalia will undermine the UN-led effort to build a Somali national army, before the withdrawal of African Union peacekeepers in 2020. Mogadishu's view is that when foreign powers negotiate separate agreements with regional governments that further weakens the central government. The state of Puntland has also aligned itself with the UAE-Saudi axis, while President Farmaajo of Somalia has adopted a position of neutrality in the Gulf crisis.

To be sure, Gulf states have played a positive role in tamping down regional conflicts; whether it is Qatar playing a mediating role in the Darfur conflict, or helping to negotiate a deal between Eritrea and Djibouti. Likewise, Saudi Arabia facilitated the peace accord between Ethiopia and Eritrea, signed in Jeddah in September

2018. In 2018, Saudi Arabia also set up the Red Sea Forum for Coastal States composed of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Sudan, Djibouti, Egypt and Somalia but Eritrea refused to join, preferring a bilateral relationship with Riyadh). As a recent report noted, the Gulf actors, "are able to fund agreements more quickly and completely than most Western donors, offering the promise of a tangible peace dividend."<sup>14</sup> but the Gulf states preference for autocratic rule, (or in the case of Qatar and Turkey, Muslim-Brotherhood-related groups), is a cause for concern, especially as the regional heavyweights – Ethiopia and Sudan– attempt to transition to democracy.

## Liberalization

Ethiopia is navigating the rivalries of Middle Eastern states and building alliances across the Red Sea at a moment of tremendous change at the domestic level.<sup>15</sup> Since becoming prime minister in April 2018, Abiy Ahmed has made peace with Eritrea, and introduced sweeping reforms, including lifting the state of emergency, releasing political prisoners and promising to rewrite the country's illiberal electoral, terrorism and media laws. Abiy has also called for free and fair elections in 2020 (Ethiopia has held elections every five years since 1995). For decades – from Mengistu to Zenawi to Desalegn – Ethiopia has kept aloof from the Gulf states and Egypt. Abiy however has sought to build ties with these countries. In 2018, he secured \$3 billion in foreign assistance and investment from the UAE, and a year's supply of oil, with payment deferred, from Saudi Arabia.<sup>16</sup> Even before Abiy's coming to power, Ethiopian officials had come to realize that their effort to ostracize Eritrea was failing, as European states engaged with Eritrea to control flow of refugees; and the UAE and Saudi sought to secure bases for their war in Yemen. The Gulf states subsequently dangled the carrot of financial assistance, pushing Ethiopia and Eritrea to make peace. Eritrea has kept its distance from Qatar and Turkey – accusing the latter of "subversive acts" and "destabilization".

As with Somalia, it's unclear how Gulf largesse will affect Ethiopia's domestic situation, if Ethiopia will become a

12. Noel Twagiramungu et al., "Re-describing transnational conflict in Africa," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (September 2019)

13. Alex de Waal, "Africa's 'Civil Wars'" *Foreign Policy* (October 22 2019)

14. International Crisis Group, *Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact Report # 206*, Brussels (September 19 2019)

15. Alex de Waal, "The Future of Ethiopia: Developmental State or Political Marketplace?" *World Peace Foundation*, August 20, 2018

16. Daniel Benaim, "Amid Revolutionary Change at Home, Ethiopia Is Remaking Its Middle East Ties," *World Politics Review* (April 9, 2019)

“developmental state” or a “political marketplace” where political actors trade loyalty for resources. Ethiopian analysts observe that such assistance will come with strings attached, and may lead to pressure on Ethiopia to support the war in Yemen, as happened with Sudan. (Under Bashir, Khartoum sent 15,000 troops to fight in Yemen.) Others view the Gulf-sponsored infrastructure projects positively, and think the planned road projects in particular, could finally grant landlocked Ethiopia – access to the Red Sea, by (re)connecting it to the port of Assab in Eritrea.<sup>17</sup>

Sudan’s democratic transition is similarly precarious. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are backing the Transitional Military Council (TMC). The military council’s leaders – al-Burhan and Hemetti – have close ties to Saudi-UAE camp, and even led Sudanese troops in Yemen. The TMC and the Forces of Freedom and Change Alliance (FFC) signed a political agreement on July 17, 2019, calling for a transition to democracy.<sup>18</sup> In August 2019, a Draft Constitutional Declaration was signed, and it was agreed that the transitional government under the leadership of Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok would guide Sudan into democratic elections in 2022. Hamdok is fully aware of the geopolitics surrounding land and water in Sudan, and the Gulf states’ maneuvering in the Nile valley. He recently observed that Sudan’s current policy of exporting crops to feed foreign animals while borrowing money to import wheat was “almost insane:” “It’s exporting water basically. We could be growing wheat and getting rid of half of our import bill.”

Sudan’s transition can be derailed by various factors – intra-elite fighting, battling between different segments of the security sector, yet external meddling is also a serious concern for Sudanese activists. Egypt wanted the Sudanese transition to be guided by the Sudanese Armed Forces (who have close ties to Cairo), while the Saudis and UAE preferred Hemetti’s Rapid Support Forces. Saudi-Emirati involvement in the transition and support for the military alienated many Sudanese, hence the calls to withdraw Sudan from the Arab League. In December 2019, Hamdok announced that the number of Sudanese troops in Yemen had been reduced to 5000, but it’s still unclear if this was an attempt to distance Sudan from the Saudi-Emirati axis. It’s also not evident if the African Union and the East African regional bloc IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on development) can help Khartoum resist outside interference and facilitate a democratic transition. Overall it remains to be seen if Sudan – and the Horn more broadly - will become the center of a “new African Order” or an “appendage of the Gulf.”<sup>19</sup>

---

17. “Ethiopia says re-opening roads to Eritrea’s Red Sea ports a priority,” Reuters (July 11 2018)

18. Mai HassanAhmed Kodouda, “Sudan’s Uprising: The Fall of a Dictator,” Journal of Democracy (October 2019)

---

19. Michael Woldemariam and Alden Young, “What Happens in Sudan Doesn’t Stay in Sudan” Foreign Affairs (July 19, 2019)

## About the author, Hisham Aidi

Hisham Aidi focuses on cultural globalization and the political economy of race and social movements. He received his Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University and has taught at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), and at the Driskell Center for the Study of the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is the author of *Redeploying the State* (Palgrave, 2008) a comparative study of neo-liberalism and labor movements in Latin America; and co-editor, with Manning Marable, of *Black Routes to Islam* (Palgrave, 2009).

In 2002–2003, Aidi was a consultant for UNDP's Human Development Report. From 2000 to 2003, he was part of Harvard University's *Encarta Africana* project, and worked as a cultural reporter, covering youth culture and immigration in Harlem and the Bronx, for *Africana*, *The New African* and *ColorLines*. More recently, his work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The New Yorker* and *Salon*. Since 2007, he has been a contributing editor of *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics and Society*. Aidi is the author most recently of *Rebel Music: Race, Empire and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (Pantheon, 2014), a study of American cultural diplomacy. Aidi teaches the SIPA MIA survey course *Conceptual Foundations of International Politics* and seminars in SIPA's summer program.

## About Policy Center for the New South

The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of the Africa as integral parts of the global South.

The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable and enterprising "new South" that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership, and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions.

[Read more](#)

The views expressed in this publication are the views of the author.



### Policy Center for the New South

Suncity Complex, Building C, Av. Addolb, Albortokal Street,  
Hay Riad, Rabat, Maroc.

Email : [contact@policycenter.ma](mailto:contact@policycenter.ma)

Phone : +212 (0) 537 54 04 04 / Fax : +212 (0) 537 71 31 54

Website : [www.policycenter.ma](http://www.policycenter.ma)