

Middle East: States Rivalry in the Horn of Africa. Key Drives, Geopolitical Implications, and Security Challenges

Nigusu Adem YIMER

Hailu Gelana ERKO

Abstract: The entanglements of Middle East states in the Horn of Africa are debilitating the politically volatile region. The Middle East states power projection schemes and the race to build up military bases have been threatening the security of the Horn region by exporting the regional rivalries in the Middle East to the Horn of Africa. Typically, as is so often the case, the rival Middle East states become more attracted to the geopolitically crucial Horn region with conflicting core interests, and the local political actors have not been casual observers; instead, they use their playing cards to shape the involvement of Middle East powers. In this vein, the growing integration of the Horn region with the Arabian Peninsula security dynamics and the rising interests of Middle East states to militarize the Horn of Africa are ending up exacerbating the stability of the Horn of Africa more than ever before.

Keywords: Horn of Africa, Middle East states, rivalry, geopolitics, security.

Context

Throughout history, the Horn of Africa has been the center of gravity for the rivalries of varieties of international and regional security players. The region also has a long-established tradition of hosting military bases for regional and global actors (Medani, 2012). Alongside, international and regional security actors' rivalries for military bases have briefly risen in the sub-region after the 9/11 terrorist attack (Lefebvre, 2012a).

Nigusu Adem YIMER

Department of History,
Jimma University, Jimma, Ethiopia
E-mail: nigusuadem@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-4455-6137

Hailu Gelana ERKO

Department of History,
Jimma University, Jimma, Ethiopia
E-mail: hailuameya@gmail.com

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Maritime security and the surge of pirate attacks in the 2000s are among the major rhetoric fodder for the rise of overseas actors' security engagement in the Horn region (Yimer, 2020). The asymmetric military buildup and outside engagement with clashing interests have substantially challenged and exacerbated the security dynamics of the region.

Geographically, the Horn of Africa is located at the strategic crossroad between Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. The region also has proximity to the strategic waterways-Red Sea, Bebel-Mandeb, and Gulf of Aden. Literally, the Horn of Africa consists of Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti. However, from the point of geopolitical proximity and transnational causes, the Horn region comprises three more nations – Kenya, Sudan, and South Sudan.

In the past two decades, the proactive policies of global and regional actors become a cumbersome security challenge for the Horn region that sometimes ends up with minor conflicts while other times escalate into all-out wars. The increasing role of global and regional powers as security providers made the Horn region the primary victim of overseas political tensions. Thus, any kind of political tension from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from Hormuz Strait to the Eastern Mediterranean has a profound impact on the political and security dynamics of the Horn region regional subsystem. In the past two decades, if one has to consider the Horn region from the point of external actors' privileged position in dictating the political and security narrations of the region, the regional order and/or the regional subsystem is becoming more volatile and multipolar as never before. The growing active role of emerging Middle East actors (i.e., Saudi Arabia, U.A.E., Qatar, Iran, and Turkey), on the one hand, and the traditional global players in the region (i.e., U.S.A., Britain, France, and Russia), on the other, complicated the political, ideological, and economic volatility of the Horn region that sometimes end up with broken order (Todman, 2018).

From the point of its geographical proximity and geopolitical significance, the oil-rich Middle East actors see the Horn of Africa as a unique sphere of influence for their ideological, political, economic, and geostrategic rivalries. While setting their approach to influencing the Horn countries, the Middle East rival actors employ interventionist foreign policy to achieve their cause in the region. The four simple reasons, among others, that helped the Middle East actors to employ interventionist policy against the Horn region are (i) the geographical proximity of the region to the Middle East; (ii) the traditional interstate and intrastate rivalry among the Horn countries; (iii) the active role of non-state militant actors in the politics of the Horn region regional subsystem and; (iv) the patterns of unstable economic system in the region.

Additionally, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)–Qatar crises (2017), on the one hand, and the Saudi–Iran cold war, on the other, have also imported the Middle East actor's ideological and political rivalry to the Horn of Africa sub-system. Yet again, the Arab

Spring (2011) – which causes ‘psychological and epistemological rupture’ in the Middle East, and the war in Yemen (2015) – which boiled the Middle East proxy – spillover to the sub-system (Gerges, 2014, p. 1).

In this context, this article tries to address questions such as: What is the rationale behind the growing appearance of Middle East states on the horizon of the Horn of Africa in the last two decades? Why and how do Middle East states clashing interests cause geopolitical turmoil in the Horn region? How regional rivalries in the Middle East region do exacerbate the security and stability of the Horn of Africa?

Middle East Actors Rivalry in the Horn of Africa: Key Derives

The Middle East actors are seeking to become a primary regional player in the security, political, ideological, and economic activities of the Horn of Africa. The growing systemic shift in the Horn of Africa region, in particular, and the entire East Africa, in general, invites emerging Middle East actors to be active political and security players in the Horn region (Marsai & Szalai, 2021). The traditional global actors in the region (i.e., United States, United Kingdom, France, and Italy) are increasingly leaving the horizon of the Horn region rivalry for emerging Middle East and Asian actors. In this manner, while the Middle East regional actors have been involved in the security and political affairs of the Horn region, they have diversified interests and foreign policy priorities. In other words, the divergent security, economic, and political strategies together with priorities of key derive have been the complementary part of the greater power rivalry between the Middle East actors in the Horn of Africa (De Oliveira & Cardoso, 2020).

Saudi Arabia

Defining Saudi’s place and position in the politics of the Horn of Africa has an imperative value in understanding the risk of Middle East actors’ power rivalries in the Horn region. In recent years, the security role of Saudi in the Horn of Africa has been visibly growing, and Riyadh has been accepted as an emerging Middle Eastern actor in determining the patterns and systems of interactions amid the Horn countries. While we talk about the interventionist foreign policy approach of Saudi in the Horn region, for instance, the domestic unhealthy patterns of interstate and intrastate interactions among the Horn countries have always been serving as a pull factor for Riyadh’s active role in the region.

In this vein, in its interventionist foreign policy, Saudi used to use peace negotiation between hostile Horn nations as a rhetoric fodder. A case in point, for instance, is Riyadh was the primary player behind the Djibouti-Eritrea rapprochement scheme. Though both Isayas and Omar Gulleh remain hostile for years, on September 17, 2018, Riyadh hosted the two party’s peace talks and rapprochements. As a result, after years of shattering and hostile relations, Djibouti and Eritrea have started working to normalize their broken political, security, and economic interactions (Lyammouri, 2018).

In the same tone, the role of Saudi in the normalization scheme of Ethiopia and Eritrea was not minimal. Saudi is also active in the politics of Somalia and Sudan. Beyond question, however, Riyadh has motives for employing an interventionist foreign policy approach in the Horn region. Riyadh's primary motive for the affairs of the Horn of Africa can be linked with security issues. The security dimension of Saudi's involvement in the Horn of Africa, in fact, has four main ins and outs:

- (i) The growing influence of other Middle East actors (i.e., Iran, Qatar, and Turkey) in the Horn region's political, security, and economic affairs is not desirable for Riyadh – as this would be a grave challenge for its national interests by developing anti-Saudi block in the region;
- (ii) Saudi's desire to prevent the spread of Shiism in the region. Meaning, the growing ideological confrontation of Saudi with Iran in the Middle East and Riyadh's plan to re-establish itself as a leading ideological and political figure in the region appears a key driver for the latter's active involvement in the politics of the Horn region.
- (iii) To prevent the anti-Riyadh axis of resistance and to establish a pro-Riyadh axis that would hypothetically prevent external actors' proxy and military engagement, as it would lead the geographically near Horn region into a potential mess. To put it differently, Riyadh does not want to see another failed state (i.e., Yemen, Syria, Iraq) near its border that would invite global and regional actors' involvement.

Additionally, the growing strategic interest and computations among the Middle East players in the Red Sea region have also alarmed Riyadh to reconsider its regional policy towards the Horn countries. Particularly, since the start of the Yemen crisis, the strategic competition among the emerging Middle East states in the Red Sea region reached its pinnacle more than ever before, and Riyadh worked to establish its axis in the region. On the bases of the renewed Middle East player's rivalry in the Red Sea region, for instance, *Egyptian-Saudi pressure which led to Djibouti, Somalia, and Sudan all cutting ties with Iran. Eritrea, Sudan and Somalia have [also] contributed troops to the Saudi coalition, while Eritrea has allowed its territory-especially the port and airbase at Assab-to be used for air strikes into Yemen* (De Waal, 2017, p. 18). Now, therefore, it is possible to say that the geographic factor has also been fevering and forcing Riyadh to closely supervise the affairs of the Horn of Africa.

The other dimension of Saudi's involvement in the Horn of Africa has economic features. Saudi is increasingly asserting itself on the economic activities of the Horn region on an unprecedented scale. The main derives of Riyadh's economic interests in the Horn region is to diversify its oil-based economic sources. In this context, Horn countries such as Ethiopia and Kenya are potential new markets for Riyadh's industrial products. Additionally, the Horn of Africa has geographical proximity to the maritime roots of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aiden, and the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb. The roots are strategically vital lifelines of world trade. Since Saudi has a close geographical position for

the above-mentioned maritime roots, it employed the policy of intervention and active engagement in the political, economic, and security issues of the Horn region ever since the post-colonial era. Notably, the magnitude of Saudi's interest on the affairs of Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Sudan is high (Mahmood, 2020).

United Arab Emirates (U.A.E)

The other Middle East actor that has been actively engaging in the political, economic, security, and ideological affairs of the Horn region is the U.A.E. The tie of the small port city of the Gulf with the Horn of Africa is not something new; rather, the Emirati had a strong link with the Horn region in the area of maritime trade long before the formation of the Emirati as a nation-state. However, with time, Abu Dhabi has been interested in presenting itself as an active actor in the political, security, economic, and ideological issues of the Horn region. To this end, the U.A.E. has changed its passive foreign policy into active engagement and has emerged as one of the main external players in the affairs of the Horn of Africa since the 2011 Arab Spring. The growing reluctance of traditional powerbrokers (i.e., the U.S.A., France, and Britain) has also helped Abu Dhabi and other emerging regional actors to easily penetrate the security and political platforms of the Horn of Africa. Unlike the UN, AU, and traditional Western actors, for instance, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh had successfully solved the long-standing hostility between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Thus, *the Eritrean-Ethiopian rapprochement, as well as a flurry of other Horn of Africa diplomacy, has greatly boosted Gulf states' visibility as geopolitical actors along the Red Sea* (Crisis Group Middle East Briefing, 2018, p. 2). The success of the Ethiopia and Eritrea reconciliation also helped Abu Dhabi to minimize opposition over its military bases at Assab (Mahmood, 2020). This active role of the U.A.E. in the Ethio-Eritrea rapprochement scheme also helped to raise the global prestige of Abu Dhabi (Donelli & Dentice, 2020).

Yet again, it is also imperative to note that while the traditional European actors' concerns in the Horn region mainly focused on 'ending piracy and its disruption of trade flows', Abu Dhabi sees the Horn of Africa as an emerging market for post-oil diversification and food security strategy efforts (Berland *et al.*, 2022).

In this sense, the vision of Abu Dhabi's political influence in the Horn of Africa has been based on the principle of political alliance, aid politics, infrastructure building, port contracts, and military base contracts. Especially, in the last two decades, the Horn of Africa has taken a central place in the foreign policy of Abu Dhabi toward Africa. The growing geopolitical and strategic influences of Abu Dhabi become a challenge and an opportunity for the Horn region. It is a challenge because Abu Dhabi is keen to protect its port contracts and military base contracts from other emerging rival actors in the region (Donelli & Dentice, 2020).

Particularly, if not managed properly, Abu Dhabi's growing appetite to dominate the geopolitical activities of the Horn region would end up further importing the Gulf crises to the Horn of Africa. On the opposite side, given the proactive foreign policy of Abu Dhabi on the Horn Region, the growing Gulf countries' political, economic, and ideological rivalry will be a possible pitfall for the geopolitical stability of the Horn region.

U.A.E. has been blamed for middling the internal and transnational realpolitik of the Horn of Africa. In the process of its organized presence, in the region, for instance, Abu Dhabi uses tools such as military aid and military training instruments, among others. To empower the capacity of the pro-Abu Dhabi local actors, for instance, Emirati gave training to the Somali army between 2014 and 2018. In the same tone, under the penon of fighting the threat of piracy on the Bab el Mandeb Strait, Abu Dhabi trained and empowered the Puntland Maritime Police Force since 2010 (Ribé, 2020).

However, the geopolitical projects of the Emirati in Mogadishu were not seen positively by certain regional rival actors (i.e., Qatar and Turkey) and the rivalry between Abu Dhabi and Qatar on one hand as well as Abu Dhabi and Turkey on the other blurt out in Somalia since 2017. The situation, all the same, challenged the active engagement foreign policy orientation of Abu Dhabi in Somalia and, on the flip side of the coin, undermined the regional stability of the Horn of Africa by inviting the Gulf crises to the region. Eventually, Emirati withdrew itself from Mogadishu and developed a new foreign policy approach to Somalia – 'wait and see' while other actors such as Turkey and Qatar assumed a good relationship with Mogadishu and become the main player in the politics of Somalia (Melvin, 2019a).

Moreover, U.A.E. halted all kinds of humanitarian and military support to Mogadishu as retaliation. The Emirati leadership then closed the Sheikh Zayed Hospital, which was built in Somalia to supply free medical care for poverty-stricken citizens. Abu Dhabi also decided to suspend a military program that started in 2014 to train Somalia's security forces. The new rift between Somalia and the U.A.E. is most likely going to deepen over time while the Emirati support continues for the regional administrations in Somaliland and Puntland (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2018).

Yet again, it is imperative to note that despite the U.A.E. employing a wait-and-see policy approach on Mogadishu, it continued to employ a more proactive and multidimensional foreign policy approach toward the remaining Horn countries than ever before. Some of the reasons for the proactive and multidimensional foreign policy orientation of Abu Dhabi over the Horn of Africa can possibly be that.

First, Abu Dhabi is working to transform its diplomatic, political, economic, and military formations in the changing global environment. In this sense, the situation in the Horn region looks like a double-spaced challenge for the Emiratis. One, the influence of traditional global actors is declining while the roles of emerging regional actors are rising.

Two, although the influence of Abu Dhabi looks good in the neighboring nations, the presence of Turkey and Qatar as important actors in the politics of Somalia abates the chance of Abu Dhabi's active engagement in its foreign policy orientation to shape the playing field of the Horn region. Meaning, with the growing involvement of emerging regional actors in the Horn region's political, economic, and security activities, Emiratis do not want to be a casual beholders. Thus, one of the reasons for the proactive foreign policy approach of the U.A.E. in the Horn of Africa stems from the aspiration of Abu Dhabi to play a central role in the changing geopolitical dynamics of the Horn region rather than being a peripheral spectator. However, this proactive policy orientation of Abu Dhabi has both challenges and opportunities. It is a challenge *because the UAE's capabilities to pursue such an ambitious agenda remained limited. It was an opportunity because the UAE could become the leading foreign policy actor in the region. Abu Dhabi has still been struggling to locate itself between these two policy options* (Telci, 2022, p. 77; Donelli & Dentice, 2020).

Second, the Horn of Africa is currently the most suitable and strategic area for Abu Dhabi as to the model of economic activities. The growing interest of Abu Dhabi to emerge as a hub for diversified economic activities of the gulf region would remain in the air if Emirati failed to secure the important water passage of the Horn of Africa – Bab-al-Mandab, the narrow passage from the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea. For Abu Dhabi to secure its strategic interests and to emerge as a hub for economic diversification, the maritime roots around the Gulf of Aden and the Strait of Hormuz should be secured. To satisfy its maritime security need, thus, Abu Dhabi has built military bases along the maritime coasts of the Horn region in areas such as the *islands of Berbera (Somaliland-Somalia), Bossaso (Puntland-Somalia), Socotra (Yemen), Perim (Yemen) and Assab (Eritrea). These bases will help the U.A.E. to become a strategic power in the Gulf of Aden and the Suez Canal passage* (Telci, 2022, p. 77). As U.A.E. and certain regional actors' economic, military, and security engagement increases, traditional (i.e., America and Europe) actors' engagement also increased in the region. The rising interest of non-traditional actors to have military bases and port facilities in the Horn region, thus, alarmed the traditional actors to balance the growing challenges of emerging regional actors such as the U.A.E., Turkey, China, and Saudi, among others.

Third, although the Horn of Africa has become the region where traditional and emerging actors compete to have a say in the political, economic, security, and ideological affairs of the region, the fear of Iran, in many ways, is another shortcoming that increases the activity of U.A.E. in the region. The increasing military capacity and political capital of Tehran in the Horn of Africa is accepted as a grave challenge for U.A.E.'s geopolitical interest in the region. Thus, Iran's growing regional influence and its active role in the war in Yemen have been considered a serious geopolitical and geo-economic challenge for Abu Dhabi in the Horn of Africa. Conversely, the growing rapprochement between

Abu Dhabi and Israel fired Tehran's engagement in the affairs of the Horn. Thus, while discussing the Tehran-Abu Dhabi rivalry in the Horn of Africa, the economist stated that Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in particular, are increasingly active in the Horn. Tensions between them rose after the UAE established diplomatic ties with Israel last year, a move that Iran furiously condemned (The Economist, 2021).

Iran

The other Middle East actor that has been actively engaging to influence the geo-economic and geo-political landscape of the Horn of Africa, as do the security and ideological competitions, is Iran. Geopolitical, geo-economic, geostrategic, and ideological competitions are the main driving reasons for Tehran's active engagement in the Horn of Africa. In the process of its engagement, however, Teheran employs economic aid, humanitarian aid, military aid, and financial support. In the ongoing Middle East states rivalry, while Iran tried to establish a good relationship with Eritrea, Qatar has been able to form friendly relations with Somalia. In the same vein, Saudi Arabia managed to establish good relations with Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti, as Turkey has formed pleasant relations with Somalia, Djibouti, and Ethiopia.

However, it is imperative to note that the relations between Middle East actors and Horn countries are not long-lasting; rather, there are inconsistent relationship configurations between the Horn countries and the Middle East actors. Telci (2022) illustrated the concept of Middle East states fluctuating relationship with the Horn nations as follows:

The case of the UAE is a good example of such fluctuating relationship patterns. The Emirati leadership has developed good relations with Djibouti and Somalia for a long time. However, particularly since 2015, both countries have distanced themselves from the Emirati influence. These countries considered the Emirati involvement in their political processes as a risky policy choice. The UAE experienced a recent crisis with Djibouti due to the mismanagement of the Doraleh Port that has been under the control of DP World, a leading port management company that belongs to Dubai (p. 79).

Another important point in the observation of Iran's engagement in the affairs of the Horn of Africa is the fact that Teheran's tactical and strategic alliance with the politically hostile and marginalized nations. The sensible strategic alliance between Iran and Eritrea, for instance, partly stemmed from the growing isolation of the latter from global and regional politics. On the ground, however, it is apparent that the *Eritrean-Iranian alliance seems an unlikely partnership [because of] a political and ideological mismatch between the Islamic Republic and a 'devotly' secular Eritrean regime* (Lefebvre, 2012b, p. 117).

It is also apparent that in 2008, noting its nearness to Eritrea and Djibouti, Tehran proposed to mediate Asmara and Djibouti. Additionally, to further strengthen its bilateral

strategic cooperation with Djibouti, in 2009, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Djibouti. Yet again, in 2009, Iran sent two warships to the coastal water of Somalia under the name of fighting piracy. This growing tie of Tehran with Horn countries was not taken plainly by Riyadh. Subsequently, *after dubious backdoor deals with Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia switched sides and severed diplomatic relations with Iran in January 2016* (Mesfin, 2016, p. 7).

Still, the ideological and geopolitical rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh in the Middle East region put at odds the computing interests of the two Middle East actors in the Horn of Africa. Indeed, as many spectators argued, the ideological struggle between Saudi and Iran on the Sunni-Shiite sectarian division, which is currently challenging the peace and security of Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, is also a threat to the stability of the Horn region (Mesfin, 2016).

Qatar

In the growing patterns of the Middle East actors' complicated engagement in the Horn of Africa, Qatar has sought to emerge as an influential political, economic, and security player. Qatar's increasing assertiveness in the Horn region has been observed for the following three simple reasons"

- (i) Thinking of the region as the proper spot for building military bases and port facilities to secure the economic, political, and ideological motives of Doha;
- (ii) Bearing in mind that financial support, military support, and economic aid as tools for winning rival actors' interest in the region, and
- (iii) Having the region (i.e., Horn) as the right venue to defuse the crises in the Gulf region. Given that, it is instructive to note that while the Gulf crises boiled the politics of the Gulf region, the ramification has been sensed beyond the Gulf shores (Mahmood, 2020).

It is apparent that the divergence of the Gulf actors has become more visible following the Arab Spring. Gulf nations split up also observed in the Gulf Cooperation Council (G.C.C.), which traditionally had provided an institutional platform for the Gulf States' partnership. The growing uncertainty of Gulf actors in the politics of the Gulf shore significantly contributes to the computing attitudes of Gulf nations over the geographically proximate oversea regions such as the Horn, among others. Given that, the Horn of Africa has been one of the regions in which the rival Gulf powers flexed their financial and military muscles. All along their rivalry, the Horn region has been a venue to sideline the interest of a certain Gulf state over the other. Saudi Arabia and U.A.E., for instance, sidelined Doha's interest in Somalia, while Qatar and Turkey did the same to challenge Riyadh and Abu Dhabi in Eritrea (Telci, 2022).

Although Qatar is blamed for proxies and middling of conflicts in the Horn of Africa, Doha is one of the longstanding Middle East players in the region that can be remembered

for facilitating the peace talk between the government of Sudan and the Darfur rebel group in 2008. Additionally, Doha initiated the peace talk between Eritrea and Djibouti to defuse the 2008 border conflict between the two nations. With this in view, for instance, Doha became the major peacekeeping force¹ supplier in the Djibouti-Eritrea frontier dispute (Mahmood, 2020).

Here are the three simple reasons why Qatar has been actively involved in the geo-political and Geo-economic competitions of the Horn of Africa. First, in many respect, political and economic interests have been the main theme for Qatar's engagement in the Horn of Africa. Doha's desire to build an influential political position in the Horn of Africa stemmed from the ambition to emerge as an iconic political figure in the existing power dynamics of the region. Thereby, politically, Doha's active engagement as a peacemaker between conflicting nations has the motive to conceptualize itself as a vital global actor in offering a peaceful solution for the complications in the region. Second, economically, as the strategic waterways of the Horn of Africa (Bab-el-Mandeb, Red Sea, and Gulf of Aiden) are vital in the global maritime trade, Doha needs to secure its interests in the strategic maritime root through creating strategic and security partnerships with the local actors (Bruno, 2021). Additionally, Qatar is thoughtful that Horn countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan, among others, have been growing economically, in which Doha is keen to benefit from the emerging economy of these countries. In other words, Qatar's appetite is increasing day by day to benefit from the emerging markets of the Horn region. In view of this, by coordinating its hard power and soft power, Qatar has been working to be seen as a vital player in the Horn of Africa. Third, the preoccupation of Qatar in the Horn region is to maximize its military influence in the region vis-à-vis certain Gulf actors (i.e., Saudi Arabia and U.A.E) and to use the region as a logistic hub to counter proxies from other Middle East rival powers (Fabricius, 2017).

Türkiye

The other active operator in the geopolitics and geo-economic landscapes of the Horn of Africa is Turkey. The increasing role of Ankara as a security and strategic partner with the Horn countries is not coincident; rather, it is part of Ankara's calculated rapprochement scheme toward Africa. Since 1998 the trajectory of Turkey's relations with Africa has been scoring progress over progress. Given this, in 2005, the Africa-Turkey relationship reached its pinnacle, and Ankara officially declared it the 'Year of Africa' (Özkan & Akgün, 2010). It is also possible to speak that over the past two decades, Turkey as an aid provider, financial source, and security and strategic partner with the Horn countries scored good achievements, even better than the traditional actors

1 As Gerald M. Feierstein (2020, p. 3) noted, following the June 2017 Gulf crises, however, both Eritrea and Djibouti backed the Saudi, U.A.E., and Bahrain sides. Afterward, Qatar withdrew its peacekeeping forces from the Djibouti/Eritrea border.

(i.e., Europeans and America) and emerging actors (China, India, U.A.E. Saudi, Qatar, and Iran). Ankara's security achievements in the Horn region, for instance, were tested successfully in its security engagement at Mogadishu, which the traditional Western actors failed to attain for several decades.

In the run-up to rooting itself as an invincible actor in the region, Turkey has been employing both soft power and diplomatic approaches. Thereby, more often than not, in the evolving patterns of the Middle East actors' overlapping engagement in the Horn of Africa, Turkey has been more comfortable approaching countries in the region. The historical tie between the Horn of Africa and the Ottomans has often been used as rhetoric fodder for the smooth and easy engagement of Turkey in the geopolitical landscape of the Horn region (Telci, 2022). Additionally, civil society organizations such as the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), Turkish Maarif Foundation, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), Turkey Red Crescent (Kizilay), and Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) have an imperative role in the soft power diplomacy between Turkey and the Horn countries (Özkan, 2021).

Turkey also uses instruments such as political cooperation, economic incentives, military aid, humanitarian assistance, and financial support, among others, to win the competition in the Horn region. In the patterns of Turkey's rivalry with emerging and traditional actors, in the region, each of these instruments (tools) is used whenever necessary and proper. Sometimes the above instruments are jointly employed to successfully curtail other actors' challenges. For instance, Political cooperation, military aid, investment, and humanitarian assistance tools have been employed by Turkey in Somalia to emerge as a dominant player in the politics of Mogadishu. Unlike Abu Dhabi, which focused on building port facilities and military bases in Somalia, Turkey's military activity in Somalia, for instance, has a package to train police forces and the national army of Somalia. Thereupon, the Ankara vs. Abu Dhabi geopolitical battle over Mogadishu ends up with the victory of the former. Then, while U.A.E. has developed a belligerent and confrontational attitude towards Somalia, Turkey emerged as a vital security ally for Mogadishu (Telci, 2022).

These complicated patterns of extra-regional actors' involvements with diversified interests have always been exacerbating the stability of the Horn region and induced complexity of foreign policy designs for the Horn nations.

Middle East Actors Rivalry in the Horn of Africa: Geopolitical Implications

The increasing assertions of Middle East players in one of the geopolitically vital but volatile regions of the world – the Horn of Africa – have both positive and downside geopolitical implications. Middle East actors' (Saudi Arabia and the UAE's) role in the restoration of peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea, for instance, has definitely had

positive geopolitical effects in the Horn of Africa. The Middle East actors also played a positive role in the complex transition process in Sudan following the downfall of Albeshir's government. Additionally, Middle East actors are hard at work in investment activities, mediation, peacekeeping, maritime logistics, and providing humanitarian aid (Donelli, 2020).

On the other hand, in the past two decades, Middle East actors' has been viewing the Horn of Africa as an experimental region to show the depth of Middle East players' political, military, economic, and diplomatic capacities. In the process of showing themselves as international stakeholders, on the global stage, however, the Horn region's geopolitical landscape become more fragile than ever before. The geopolitical downside of Middle East actors' intricacy in the Horn of Africa stems from the more ambitious interests of Middle East players in the region to show themselves as international stakeholders.

However, the ambitious and complicated engagements of Middle East actors in the Horn of Africa, in many ways, have affected the local political landscape of the region. What is more vital is that, as the rival Middle East players become more attracted to the geopolitically crucial Horn region with conflicting core interests, the local political actors have not been casual observers; rather, they use their playing cards to shape the involvement of outside players in the region. In this regard, for instance, Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea try to use their strategic position along the shore of the Horn region as a card to influence the configuration of extra-regional actors' activities in the region. In the same tone, in the pattern of shaping external actors' involvement in the region, Ethiopia and Kenya try to use their influential political and economic status as a card to further their domestic interests. In this regard, so far, many scholarly works have overlooked the role of local actors in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Horn of Africa; rather, many of them have been stressing the implications of extra-regional players on the geopolitical dynamics of the region. Thus, it is imperative to note that in the geopolitical dynamics of the Horn of Africa, the local political complications should not be oversimplified in shaping the complex problems of the wider region. Meaning, the local politics of the Horn region too has a profound impact on shaping the geopolitics of the Horn of Africa by inviting external actors to the regional complications. As Guido Lanfranchi noted, for instance, *[the] two-way connection between geopolitics and local politics is particularly evident in the experiences of Somalia and Djibouti* (Lanfranchi, 2021). That would normally be the case that *on the one hand, the geostrategic position of these two countries on the Horn's shores has historically attracted many foreign players, which have deeply influenced local political landscapes. On the other hand, by seeking to leverage foreign backing to their own advantage, local political actors have brought their struggles to a regional and global level* (Lanfranchi, 2021).

Particularly, since the 2011 Arab Spring, the rivalry between Middle East powers in the Horn region has been unprecedentedly growing. For the growing Middle East players'

involvement in the Horn region, the local collaborators' role is not minimal. This is the case because, on the side of the premise, the Middle East actors cultivate collaborations with the local actors of the Horn region to use them as a proxy in the broader Middle East and North Africa regions. On the flip side, the local actors align with extra-regional actors to find potential external patronage for the local complications. Although this two-way nexus between the local actors and extra-regional players – with varieties of goals – has complicated the geopolitical landscape of the volatile Horn region, there has been no/little move by the local actors, even, to reduce the influence of extra-regional actors. Rather, local actors tried to use all the necessary tools at hand to align with extra-regional actors. However, the local actors' collaboration with Middle East actors has been profoundly challenging the local balance of power and deteriorating the peace of the region more than ever before (Ragab, 2017).

Regarding the growing engagements of the Middle East actors in the Horn of Africa and its geopolitical implication for the region, for instance, reports of the United States Institute for Peace stated the following:

In the last five years, the geopolitical landscape of the Red Sea arena has been fundamentally reshaped. The Horn of Africa is now an integral part of and in fact the link among the security systems of the Middle East, the Indo-Pacific, and the Mediterranean by virtue of the strategic importance of and competition for influence over the Red Sea and the states that border and depend upon it for trade and transit. Middle Eastern states are asserting themselves in the Horn of Africa in ways unprecedented in at least a century, and the Red Sea arena is becoming increasingly militarized. As in the eastern Mediterranean, the export of Middle Eastern rivalries into the Horn of Africa – with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Egypt contesting Turkey and Qatar for dominance – is fueling instability and insecurity in an already fragile, volatile, and conflict-prone region (Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena, 2020).

Moreover, the two-way uncontrolled, and unbalanced nexus between local actors (seeking external patronage) and Middle East players (potentially using the local actors as proxy agents) has also been challenging the security of the region. This is the case because, *through these alliances, international disputes can quickly spill over into domestic politics, potentially magnifying existing local tensions if each party perceives that it can rely on strong foreign backing (Lanfranchi, 2021).*

Middle East tensions spilling over to the Horn of Africa is remarkably evident during the 2017 Gulf crises. The diverging position of the Middle East powers' rivalry over regional issues reached its pinnacle in the so-called 'Gulf Cries' in 2017. The escalations of rivalries between the rival blocs of the Middle East powers soon spilled over to the Horn of Africa. As a result, countries such as Somalia become the primary victims of importing the tensions between Middle East rival blocs. The spillover of Middle East powers' rivalry,

in one or other ways, has contributed to the production of more conflicts and tensions in the political divisions of Mogadishu. For instance, as Guido Lanfranchi (2021) noted, *the dispute between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and the Federal Member States (FMSs) – rooted in political disagreements over federal power-sharing – has been hardened by the increasing reliance of both sides on rival foreign sponsors (Turkey and Qatar for the FGS; the UAE for the FMSs)* (Lanfranchi, 2021).

On the other hand, the geopolitical crises of the volatile Horn region have been shaped by the extra-regional players' dispute over military bases in Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, and Sudan. For many reasons, the Middle East actors' military base competition in the Horn of Africa is ignored, while unrelated developments got much weight. However, the competition over military bases in the Horn of Africa is a reason behind the instability in the region, where countries have been repeatedly engulfed by deep-rooted authoritarian systems; and where Middle East players and global actors have become the chief backers and financiers of these authoritarian governments. It is also unfortunate to note that neither the global actors nor the regional Middle East players are much worried about authoritarianism in the Horn of Africa so long as their interests are protected (Melvin, 2019a).

The other side from which the geopolitical complications of the Horn of Africa stems is from hosting multiple foreign actors' military bases at a very little distance from one another. For instance, the tiny port state of the Horn region, Djibouti, hosts more than seven military bases from different flags with diversified geopolitical interests. What is astonishing is that despite the foreign military bases in Djibouti being located at a very limited distance from one other, the government of Ismail Omar Guelleh is still inviting additional nations to open their military bases in Djibouti. In this regard, Horn nations such as Djibouti are using their strategic position as leverage to shape the geopolitical makeup of the Horn of Africa and to emerge as influential actors on the regional stage. Additionally, Djibouti is trying to use its strategic significance to balance the influence of a single foreign actor's domination over the domestic and international policies of the country. However, there is also a possibility that hosting multiple nations' military bases will challenge the sovereign states of the tiny port nation by importing proxies of belligerent nations. The other possible risk of renting military bases to multiple global actors is the decline of the legitimacy of the host government on both the domestic and international levels. This is indeed the case because hosting different flag states, in one or other ways, limit the free decision-making capacity of a nation that hosts the military of several flags. Djibouti can be taken as a good example of this scenario because Washington strongly challenged Omar Guelleh's government for hosting Beijing's military facility at a little distance from Camp Lemonnier (America's Military base in Djibouti) (Yimer, 2021).

Middle East Actors Scramble for Influence: Security Challenges for the Horn

In the new and shifting geopolitics of the Horn of Africa, the role of emerging regional actors is not minimal. The assertive move of Middle East states to emerge as a dominant security provider and power projection to the Horn of Africa influenced major political changes in the region. These political changes include redistribution of power, realignment, and regime changes. In the last two decades, the competing nature of the Middle East players' involvement together with their growing appetite for military and economic presence in the Horn region exacerbated the security of the Horn region. The relative silence of the traditional actors to curtail the rivalries of emerging actors also further complicated the security complex of the sub-region more than ever before. Emerging Middle East states unprecedented military action, port development, area competition, and base build-up risk militarizing the Horn of Africa. Correspondingly, the political and ideological battles amid the Middle East states in the Horn of Africa have reportedly rise security tension in the sub-region. In this vein, it is imperative to note that 'rising powers' involvement in the Horn has facilitated geopolitical tensions and regional rivalries that risk militarizing the region and impacting human security by reinforcing more state-centric conceptions of security concentrated on territorial and border disputes (Kabandula & Shaw, 2018, p. 13).

The militarization and areal completion of Middle East states in the Horn of Africa particularly grow following the Arab Spring (2011), the war in Yemen (2015), and the split in the GCC (2017). The armed conflict in Yemen, for instance, invites Iran to project its power beyond the Gulf. Saudi Arabia on its part, however, does not want to see Iran's active appearance in the Yemen crisis. As a result, the Saudi-Iran proxy started in Yemen in which Iranian-backed al Houthis while the Saudi lead bloc backed the government of Yemen. Subsequently, the armed conflict in Yemen and the proxy role of Middle East players in the war increased the geopolitical significance of the Horn of Africa for its strategic location (Ragab, 2017).

As noted in the above sections, the political split in the Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) and the subsequent fragile political atmosphere amid member states cause the reshuffling of regional power distribution and realignment. In the political alteration and polarization of regional differences, the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi-Manama axis marginalized Qatar from the group of GCC. The rift in the GCC invites Turkey to assert itself as Qatar's close ally both materially and symbolically. Turkey goes to the extent of airlifting foods and medical supplies as well as the Ankara-Doha joint commando force was established in Doha. This fragile political arena in the Middle East has manifested and spilled over to the Horn of Africa in many different ways as [...] *regional states aligned either for or against Qatar. Tensions increased and led to even more involvement of Middle East states in the Horn of Africa* (Donelli & Cannon, 2021, p. 6). Thereupon, the growing areal

interest and economic engagement of the Middle East states in the Horn of Africa and their ill-calculated intervention in the affairs of the Horn nations have progressively damaged the security of the region in provoking retaliation amid hostile nations of the region. To present it differently, the clashing interests of Middle East nations and the power imbalance with the Horn nations have been creating insecurity and exacerbating the stability of the region.

The progressive militarization of the Horn of Africa, on the other hand, has enhanced the volatility of the region where certain Middle East power easily legitimizes their appearance in the region. The situation also shattered the regional balance and distribution of power. Additionally, the growing competition of certain Middle East states to the Horn region increased the possibility of alignment and realignment in the sub-region where Middle East states are surely behind this blatant initiative. In the process of this alignment and realignment, therefore, the order and the system of the sub-region wind up importing the power rivalries in the Arabian Peninsula to the Horn of Africa, which ends up exacerbating the stability of the region. In this context, Eritrea and Sudan, for instance, *in an attempt to gain the utmost benefit from the worsening of Middle Eastern tensions, decided to break their relations with Teheran, in favor of a rapprochement with the Gulf monarchies* (Donelli & Gonzalez-Levaggi, 2021, p. 9). Above all, the multilayered domestic problems of the Horn of Africa such as intrastate and interstate conflict; insurgency and counter-insurgency activities; the presence of some weak and failed states; and the growing importance of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aiden in the global geopolitics, among others, exposed the Horn of Africa for a permeable external influence. Once more, *the lack of a sustainable and autonomous economic system has accentuated the quest by HOA [Horn of Africa] states for extra-regional partners (external dependence) and the risk of their increasing political interference* (Donelli & Gonzalez-Levaggi, 2021, p. 8). In this vein, in the trajectory of the Middle East states relations with the Horn countries, the former has begun to view the latter *as a laboratory in which they can experiment with their ability as international stakeholders* (Donelli & Gonzalez-Levaggi, 2021, p. 8).

However, the rationale that the Middle East states have the ability to present themselves as stakeholders in the security of the Horn of Africa faces three critical problems. One, Middle Eastern states' interventionist policy and polarized rivalry attract the attention of other non-Middle Eastern actors such as Turkey and China, among others, to the Horn of Africa. After the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, particularly, Turkey approached Qatar to counter Gulf monarchs' dominant states in the Gulf of Aiden and Red Sea areas in particular and the greater Horn region at large. Turkey's policy of strengthening its hard power in the region has pushed the Gulf Monarchs to double their hard power build-up in the Horn of Africa that in turn invites the local actors to choose their sides. Thereupon, certain Middle East states' ability to act as international stakeholders have over and over again been challenged either with the involvement

of traditional global actors or with the rising powers' interventionist policy to the region. Two, the power projection of Middle East states to the Horn of Africa as security stakeholders are somehow imperfect. It is imperfect because some of the Middle East states themselves are found in an unstable security environment where a multilayered complication has been mushrooming. Thereupon, as the security dilemma in the Middle East is not lower than the security dilemma in the Horn of Africa, the presence of Middle East states as stakeholders in the security of the Horn of Africa is a simple calculation to defuse their regional rivalry in the Middle East to the Horn of Africa. Three, although the Middle East states assert themselves as stakeholders in the security of the Horn of Africa, their power projection failed to mitigate the security burden of the region. Rather, Middle East states power projection further militarized the Horn of Africa where the security condition is exacerbated at all hours of the day and night.

Conclusion

The ongoing power rivalries amid Middle East states in their region are spilling over to the Horn of Africa. The fact that the Horn of Africa is geographically proximate to the Arabian Peninsula and the competing and sometimes overlapping interests of the Middle East states over the Horn region emerged as a major challenge for the security of the region. In this vein, Middle East states power projection and the race to build up military bases in the Horn of Africa are transforming the region into a major hotspot for wider international security competition and militarization. Above all, over exporting the regional rivalries in the Middle East to the Horn of Africa, the former (i.e., Middle East states power projection) has substantially been contributing to the volatility of the latter.

In the same manner, the rising interests of certain Emerging Middle East state to militarize the Horn of Africa on the one hand, and the passive spectatorship of the traditional global actors on the other is ending up destabilizing the Horn of Africa more than ever before. In parallel, it is not usual to see tensions rise in the Horn region when extra-regional competitions in areas like- the Middle East, the Gulf, and the Indio-Pacific rise. This is the case because major actors in the Middle East or the Gulf or the Indio-Pacific regions have military bases in the Horn region. In this sense, *the emergence of crowded international security politics in the Horn of Africa raises ... proxy struggles, growing geopolitical tensions, and a further extension of externally driven security agendas in the region* (Melvin, 2019b, p. 30).

Typically, as is so often the case, as the rival Middle East players become more attracted to the geopolitically crucial Horn region with conflicting core interests, the local political actors have not been casual observers, rather they use their playing cards to shape the involvement of outside players in the region. Thereupon, *[Horn of] African states are not mere passive actors but seek to maximize their benefits from the Middle*

East competition, [and] they appear to be largely at the mercy of the alliances with their Middle Eastern partners (Donelli & Gonzalez-Levaggi, 2021b, p. 15).

Thus, on all these dimensions, understanding why and how the Middle East states' rivalry has been rising in the Horn of Africa requires an understanding of the integration of the Horn region with the Arabian Peninsula security dynamics. In this sense, the possible prospect scenario is that the expansion of the Middle East and Gulf region security space to the Horn of Africa, at best, raises the geopolitical and geo-economic tension in the region, at worst, triggers an all-out war amid Horn nations that would cause the broken regional order to collapse. However, the point here is not to dwarf the Middle East states' economic and humanitarian aid in the Horn of Africa but rather to show it is the 'black box' of the looming danger in the region – a danger that arises from the competition over military bases and power projection.

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