



Conflict Resolution Efforts by GCC States in Africa

Hubert Kinkoh*
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Introduction

In response to escalating threats and challenges to peace and security in numerous African states and regions, the Gulf states have emerged as significant actors in conflict resolution and peacebuilding across the continent. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states' involvement in conflict situations across Africa is motivated by a blend of security and economic interests, along with geopolitical ambitions. Their approach typically includes a mix of diplomatic efforts, direct military assistance, humanitarian aid, and development initiatives.

This policy brief explores the nature of various Gulf states' engagement in Africa's peace and security landscape, highlighting the motivations, specific interventions, and challenges they face. It concludes with practical recommendations for achieving better and mutually beneficial peace and security outcomes for both regions.

Why GCC states engage in Africa's peace and security landscape

The Gulf states' involvement in Africa's peace and security landscape is driven by several key factors. Both regions face shared security concerns, including enduring conflicts such as the civil wars in Yemen and Sudan, the situation in Libya, and ongoing tensions in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. Terrorism and violent extremism are mutual threats, with both regions

combating transnational terrorist networks like Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Al-Qaida affiliates in the Sahel. Humanitarian crises resulting from these conflict situations contribute to the increasing number of [forced migrants](#) heading to Gulf states.

Additionally, the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, crucial maritime routes for global trade, are vital to the economic and geostrategic [interests](#) of the various African and Gulf states, yet remain threatened by piracy, smuggling, and other geopolitical competition and maritime threats. The geographical proximity, particularly of Saudi Arabia, to the Horn of Africa underscores the strategic importance of Gulf states' engagement—through the Red Sea Cooperation Council, military and naval cooperation, and investments in port infrastructure in the Red Sea region.

More pointedly, both regions recognize that peace and political stability are essential for trade and investment. Accordingly, Gulf actors' [economic engagements](#) in African states are closely linked to conflict resolution efforts. In turn, African states are eager to collaborate with Gulf states to address contemporary security threats and regional conflicts, fostering stability and stronger trade and investment partnerships.

Gulf states as peace partners in Africa

There is evidence indicating that Gulf states play a vital role in fostering peace and stability in Africa through a range of conflict resolution efforts. This is evident through their



involvement in mediation and peace talks, support for regional security initiatives, training and equipping security personnel, offering humanitarian aid, and enhancing security through diverse investments across various sectors.

Mediation and peace negotiations

Saudi Arabia's significant role in mediating conflicts and facilitating peace talks is evident in the context of the ongoing war in Sudan that erupted on April 15, 2023. Notably, it hosted the May 2023 Jeddah talks to address the conflict in Sudan, resulting in a [Jeddah Declaration](#) of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan between the warring Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which included commitments to humanitarian relief and civilian protection, among others. More recently, Saudi Arabia co-hosted, alongside Switzerland, US-led talks in Geneva on August 14, 2024 that aimed to ease the human suffering resulting from the war and achieve a lasting ceasefire. Although the talks did not end the fighting, they positioned Saudi Arabia as an important actor in mediation and negotiation facilitation, given the complex regional dynamics and the involvement of other external actors with vested interests in Sudan.

Qatar has also played a [crucial role](#) in mediating various inter-state conflicts in Africa, often stepping in where traditional powers have struggled. Notably, it assisted in mediating the Jeddah peace agreement with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which re-established diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea following a two-decade hiatus. Doha was also instrumental in quelling tensions and restoring diplomatic ties between Kenya and

Somalia, after Mogadishu severed ties with Nairobi for six months from December 2021. As tensions between the two neighbors rise due to M23 rebel activity, it is currently attempting to mediate a settlement between Rwanda and the DRC. Additionally, Doha mediated an agreement between the United States and the Rwandan government that resulted in the 2023 release of opposition leader Paul Rusesabagina. Moreover, it has backed the African Union's measures to advance peace and stability in Africa and elsewhere, including the Israeli-Palestine war.

Support for regional stability initiatives

By backing regional security frameworks and initiatives, Gulf states also contribute to a more stable and secure environment in Africa. Both Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's support for international efforts to combat terrorism and violent extremism in the Sahel are notable in this regard. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi [recently](#) committed US\$100 million and US\$ 30 million respectively in continuation of long-standing support to the G5 Sahel Joint Force--an initiative that pools together troops from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Additionally, the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), established in 2015 by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, is actively combating terrorism from groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS in the Sahel. The coalition currently includes 42 members, comprising the six GCC states and 25 African nations.



Given the significant emphasis the UAE places on securing strategic maritime routes, particularly around the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, the development of ports in Somaliland (the unrecognized breakaway republic in northern Somalia) and Puntland, as well as military outposts in Eritrea and Somaliland are an extension of their efforts to protect shipping lanes and enhance control over key sea routes. Their stability is vital for African countries, the Gulf, and the rest of the world. Consequently, the [UAE](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#) have established military bases along the Red Sea coast and are involved in security initiatives to combat piracy and terrorism. While their military presence in the region responds to shared regional security threats, their military foothold is also seen as a means to project its geopolitical influence.

Training and equipping of security forces

The Gulf states have also been actively involved in training and equipping local security forces in conflict-prone areas in Africa. In Somalia, for example, the UAE has provided extensive support to the Puntland Maritime Police Force and Somaliland's military. The UAE's military [support](#) also extends to several countries including Ethiopia, Mauritania, Chad, Mali, Nigeria, Egypt, Morocco, Senegal, Angola, Kenya, DRC, Tanzania, Uganda, and Mozambique, underscoring its commitment to addressing security threats that have far-reaching implications for regional stability. The UAE, in collaboration with the IMCTC, has recently joined forces with Burkina Faso to provide special forces training programs aimed at addressing the security challenges in the Sahel region.

Relatedly, Qatar has also invested in training and equipping security forces in Somalia, where it supported efforts to combat piracy and terrorism by providing training and resources to Somali security forces.

Humanitarian assistance

GCC states' conflict resolution efforts in Africa are complemented by substantial humanitarian assistance. Contributions from Saudi Arabia have provided substantial humanitarian aid, amounting to over \$45 billion, to African countries affected by conflict and crises. The Kingdom's humanitarian assistance to African countries highlights its commitment to alleviating human suffering and supporting vulnerable populations. In addition, through contributions from Qatar Fund For Development (QFFD), Qatar Charity, and Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS), Doha has provided significant support, including food aid, medical supplies, and financial assistance, to African [countries facing crises](#) such as South Sudan, Sudan, Niger, and Somalia.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the UAE played a crucial role in providing humanitarian assistance to African countries through its approach of promoting security and stability through development and humanitarian efforts. It provided logistics support to the COVAX initiative, facilitating access to vaccines across the continent and reinforcing the UAE's reputation as a reliable partner in times of crisis. Abu Dhabi has continued to be proactive in addressing the humanitarian crisis caused by instability in the Sahel, by providing over [US\\$600million](#) to the five Sahel countries between 2018-2023. Recently, the UAE has



focused on providing relief aid to cope with the influx of displaced people from the war in Sudan to Chad.

Promoting security through development

The Gulf states have heavily invested in various [development projects](#) aimed at improving infrastructure, healthcare, and education in conflict-prone areas. In terms of infrastructure, Dubai Ports World (DP World) is a leader in port expansion and maritime collaboration, managing projects in over 10 African countries. Oman, for its part, has an agreement with Djibouti to develop the Port of Doraleh, one of the most important ports on the Red Sea.

Through the Saudi Fund for Development, Saudi Arabia has financed over 400 projects in 46 countries, totaling \$10.7 billion, which represents 57% of its funding in developing countries. These projects support sectors such as agribusiness, energy and mining, transportation, logistics, infrastructure, and tourism. Qatar has also been active in African development projects, particularly in East Africa. This includes establishing a solar power plant in Rwanda, acquiring stakes in Bugesera International Airport and Rwandair, constructing a key port in Somalia, funding the expansion of the Port of Mombasa in Kenya, and building a new port in Tanzania.

These investments, while helping GCC states' economic diversification ambitions, play an important role within the framework of developmental peace in building resilience and promoting long-term stability in African countries by addressing the root causes of conflict, such as poverty and lack of access to basic services.

Challenges and gaps in Gulf states' conflict resolution efforts in Africa

Taken together, these interventions underscore the Gulf states' ability to navigate complex political landscapes in order to achieve peaceful outcomes in various contexts in Africa. Still, the Gulf states' conflict resolution efforts in Africa are not without challenges. Notably, the November 2023 invitation by Riyadh of suspended AU member states—such as Gabon, Niger, and Sudan—to the inaugural [Saudi Arabia-Africa Summit](#) has been interpreted by African experts as undermining the AU's norms and principles relating to democratic governance, peace, and security. In this context, questions about the underlying motives not only of Saudi Arabia, but also other Gulf states as responsible global actors, are raised.

Additionally, the UAE's engagement with non-state actors to advance its strategic interests for instance, through its collaboration with Field Marshall Khalifah Haftar in Libya and its support for the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan has been destabilizing, with worrying implications for regional security. Although the UAE and Saudi Arabia were among the international actors that quickly moved to call for a halt to violence when the war in Sudan broke out, the Sudanese army has repeatedly [accused](#) the UAE of providing weapons and support to the RSF in Sudan's 18-month-old war, in contravention to the UN Charter, and with serious implications to regional peace and security. The Gulf state denies the allegations, even as UN sanctions monitors have described the accusations as credible.



Furthermore, the Gulf state's involvement in Africa is often viewed through the lens of regional rivalries, particularly with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Competition for influence on the continent complicates Gulf states' conflict resolution initiatives as competing interests sometimes undermine collective efforts for peace. The Gulf crisis of 2017 shows how these rivalries sucked in African states like Somalia with a [destabilizing effect](#). Against the backdrop of the crisis, Qatar withdrew its peacekeeping forces from the disputed Djibouti-Eritrea border days after both African countries announced they would side with Saudi Arabia in the diplomatic rift. This decision heightened the risk of a military conflagration between Djibouti and Asmara spiralling out of the border dispute with deleterious consequences for the regional stability of the Horn of Africa.

At the same time, fierce Gulf rivalries are playing out as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar seek to expand their [spheres of influence](#)-including through commercial ports and military outposts on Africa's Red Sea coast. Interest from great powers has further complicated the changing geopolitical landscape considering the number of foreign militaries in the tiny port nation of Djibouti, at the fulcrum of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. For the fragile African states on the western shores of the Red Sea, new engagement from outside powers presents both challenges and opportunities.

Almost a year since Ethiopia signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Somaliland granting Ethiopian naval forces access to 20 kilometers of Somaliland's

coastline, the situation has been exacerbated by decisions made by countries outside of the Horn, including the UAE. The UAE backed the Ethiopian move to have a military presence on Somaliland's coastline. Understandably, Dubai-based logistics group, DP World, is heavily invested in the Port of Berbera, the commercial capital of Somaliland on the south coast of the Gulf of Aden, and has shown an [interest](#) in cooperating in developing the new Ethiopian port.

While the UAE's response to the MoU has been more restrained compared to Egypt and Turkey, it remains a key player in the region. Egypt opposed the deal due to its antagonism toward Ethiopia and moved in August 2024 to sign a security agreement with Somalia to provide weapons and military aid. Meanwhile, Turkey committed to enhancing Somalia's naval capabilities to counter Ethiopia's growing influence. The UAE's involvement poses a risk to Qatar's position in their maritime rivalry over strategic ports in East Africa. In 2019 Qatar's [\\$170m deal](#) to develop the Hobyo seaport in Somalia fell through. Beyond building port infrastructure, the agreement also aimed to raise Qatar's profile and influence within the country and counter the influence of its Gulf neighbours in the region.

This diplomatic crisis is strengthening the alignment between Qatari and Egyptian foreign policies, while also deepening geopolitical rifts between Egypt and the UAE, a traditional Gulf ally that now increasingly sides with Ethiopia on regional issues. At the same time, Turkey's growing influence in the country threatens to [disrupt](#) the established influence of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Turkey is Qatar's main



regional ally and has been Somalia's largest foreign investor, operating the main port in Mogadishu since 2014.

Enhancing crisis diplomacy: Opportunities for Gulf and African states

Although GCC states' conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts in Africa have faced challenges, new opportunities for strategic collaboration present themselves, particularly as both regions deal with changes in the balance of power in the world.

It will be crucial to bridge diplomatic efforts between Gulf and African states in the Sahel region and in conflict areas like Sudan, Libya, and Somalia to scale efforts to resolve current disputes and stop simmering ones. To this end, and considering funding gaps for conflict resolution endeavours in Africa, Gulf actors could consider allocating more predictable and sustained financial and technical support for mediation and peace negotiation initiatives. This could go a long way in providing regional organizations such as the African Union (AU) and regional economic communities (RECs) the resources required to undertake preventative diplomacy and conflict resolution before various tensions turn into crises.

Gulf financial and material support for the AU's peace support operations could also enhance peacekeeping efforts on the continent. This is even more critical at a time when resources at the UN for peacekeeping in Africa are drying up amidst withdrawal of various UN missions from parts of the continent and heightened spending by its biggest donors on the wars in Gaza and Ukraine. Relatedly, establishing

regional security pacts similar to NATO can provide a formal structure for mutual defense and cooperation, including provisions for collective defense, joint training exercises, and coordinated responses within the context of peacekeeping and stabilization.

Strengthening coordination and consultations between regional organisations and councils would undoubtedly contribute to exchanging experiences and information, ensuring cohesive efforts, and achieving better results across different levels. The AU and GCC are two examples of organizations that can be used as forums to improve political communication and dispute settlement. Therefore, strengthening cooperation between the two regions through annual formal and informal consultations and joint mechanisms for collective security could lessen the burden on established peace and security actors like the European Union (EU). Additionally, the two regions could consider leveraging diplomatic engagements through summits and bilateral visits to build solidarity among states. Adopting polyilateral diplomatic strategies that include a broader range of stakeholders--like non-state actors and civil society--could enhance the effectiveness of preventive diplomacy, thus contributing to conflict prevention.

Gulf states' ongoing support for regional initiatives and mechanisms established to address transnational threats such as terrorism and organized crime is crucial. To provide mutual support in counter-terrorism efforts more effectively, African and Gulf countries could create joint task forces that include military, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies across multiple states. This would be



critical for a region like the Sahel where terrorism is spreading to the West African coast, as well as the Horn of Africa, with serious implications for regional and international peace and security.

Relatedly, African governments should ensure that Gulf investments in development projects are properly channeled towards addressing the context-specific socio-economic factors that contribute to terrorism, such as poverty and unemployment and governance challenges within affected countries/regions. For example, responsible investment by Gulf actors in port infrastructure and other sectors could boost employment thus creating opportunities to improve stability and reduce the lure of terrorism in East Africa.

African and Gulf countries can also collaborate to better secure maritime routes in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden by forming a broader council, similar to the Red Sea Cooperation Council, which includes countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Djibouti, to include more African and Gulf states. The goal is to enhance the capacity of the Council to tackle piracy, smuggling, transnational organised crime, and other maritime threats through coordinated efforts. For example, conducting joint naval patrols and military exercises could enhance the readiness and interoperability of the naval forces of participating countries to deter and respond to maritime threats more effectively. These efforts would ensure the safe passage of goods, simultaneously contributing to regional stability and economic growth for both regions. In light of the growing humanitarian crisis in Sudan, the Sahel, and elsewhere in Africa, Gulf countries can work with international

humanitarian actors to pool resources and enhance the reach of humanitarian relief to vulnerable populations affected by violent conflict and other crises. The African Humanitarian Agency is a critical tool that requires support. Both the GCC and AU should consider the best approaches to ensure its efficient and sustained operations. This would improve the AU's capacity to address humanitarian crises resulting from conflicts across the continent.

The Africa-Gulf partnership in the area of crisis diplomacy is expected to deepen, marked by increased cooperation and joint ventures. How the two regions navigate this engagement within the context of changing global dynamics will determine the extent to which they both reap mutual benefits.

**Hubert Kinkoh is a Non-Resident Research Fellow at the GRC.*

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