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# Ports, Power, and Proxy Wars: GCC Engagement in the Horn of Africa

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## The Horn of Africa and Its Challenges

The Horn of Africa, encompassing Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, is a region rich in natural resources, including critical minerals, gold, oil, gas, vast arable land, and livestock. Strategically positioned between the Bab el Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea, it is a key transit point for commercial vessels connecting Asian, European, and African markets via the Suez Canal. According to the International Monetary Fund, approximately [15%](#) of global trade passes through these channels. This makes the region vital to global trade and a focal point for regional and international powers vying for influence, often leading to geopolitical rivalries.

Despite its vast economic potential, the region remains plagued by deep-rooted instability. In Somalia, a long-running separatist movement has fueled years of war, resulting in a semi-autonomous Puntland and the self-declared Somaliland. Ethiopia grapples with domestic conflict in its Tigray region, while territorial disputes continue to divide Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan. Egypt and Sudan have disputed Ethiopia's near-complete Grand Ethiopian Renaissance [Dam](#), which will hinder their access to the Nile River while unleashing Ethiopia's hydropower potential. Meanwhile, the persistent threat of terrorism, most notably from Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Kenya—further exacerbates regional insecurity. Beyond these internal crises, maritime insecurity—especially off the Somali coast—disrupts trade and contributes to an unstable environment. The Gulf states view these security threats as direct challenges to their own national security and economic interests, particularly in maritime trade.

The Horn of Africa is also a strategic region for global powers. As part of its Belt and

Road Initiative, China has increased its presence there by investing in critical infrastructure, such as ports in Djibouti, where it also operates a military base. The United States, long involved in counterterrorism efforts, maintains military bases in [Djibouti](#) to foster regional stability and counter China's influence. Meanwhile, in February 2024, the European Union launched a naval mission to protect commercial shipping in the Red Sea, with Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, and Italy deploying [forces](#). Russia, seeking to reassert itself globally, has pursued military and diplomatic engagements with countries like Somalia and Eritrea, attempting to expand its influence on the continent. Turkey has bolstered its regional engagement through commercial investments, defense cooperation with Somalia, and military training with Djibouti's [forces](#).

Following recent instability in the Middle East, particularly the conflict in Gaza, Iran has also sought to further expand its influence in the Horn of Africa, exacerbating the region's instability. Tehran has used its proxies to fuel unrest, with Houthi rebels posing a particular threat to maritime security. Over the past year, the Houthis have launched multiple [attacks](#) on commercial ships and oil tankers crossing the Red Sea. Given oil's central role in the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) wealth, countering such disruptions remains a top priority.

In addition to direct attacks, reports suggest that Houthi militias are operating weapons smuggling networks in Somalia and Sudan while also recruiting and training vulnerable citizens across the Horn. Iranian proxies capitalize on the absence of a regional hegemon to expand their influence in the [region](#). Piracy is a persistent issue that



compounds these threats. In March 2025, Somali pirates hijacked a Yemeni-flagged fishing boat in Puntland – part of a concerning resurgence of [piracy](#) since 2023. Together, these security challenges reinforce the region's volatility, heightening concerns for the Gulf states that rely on stable maritime trade.

Recognizing these threats, the GCC states, including the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, have attempted to strengthen their presence in the Horn of Africa. They have invested in maritime security, port infrastructure, and military alliances to protect their economic and security interests. The GCC states have also leveraged humanitarian ties with countries in the Horn to implement their strategies. Overall, these efforts aim to counter piracy and terrorism and embolden regional influence while securing vital trade routes. However, as foreign powers continue to assert their influence, the Horn of Africa remains a contested and volatile region, shaping the policy priorities of the Gulf region.

### Saudi Arabia's Strategy and Investments

Stability in the Horn of Africa is fundamental to Saudi Arabia's economic reform and geopolitical ambitions. The Kingdom's Vision 2030 agenda will invigorate non-oil sectors, particularly tourism, agriculture, mining, and logistics. With tourism projected to contribute [10%](#) of GDP by 2030, Saudi Arabia is heavily investing in the Red Sea coast, most notably through [NEOM](#), a planned mega-city and tourist hub. However, instability in the Horn of Africa, including terrorism, piracy, and civil conflict, inhibits these ambitions.

To safeguard its long-term goals, Saudi Arabia is actively strengthening its presence in the Horn of Africa through a three-pronged

approach: defense alliances, economic investment, and soft power diplomacy. These efforts aim to promote stability, secure strategic interests, counter regional rivals, and expand Saudi influence in the region.

Saudi Arabia's actions in the Horn of Africa also reflect a broader geopolitical strategy to contain rival influence, particularly from [Iran](#). Iran has sought to expand its reach across Africa, often backing Islamist factions. For instance, intelligence reports indicate that the Houthis have offered material and technical support to Al-Shabaab. In return, the [Somali](#) provocateurs would increase piracy and ransom operations in the Gulf of Aden.

Therefore, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have sought to curtail Iran's influence by forming defense alliances. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman established the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) in 2016, reinforcing Saudi Arabia's leadership in regional security. With 43 Arab and African members, the IMCTC is an important tool for combating extremism. High-level defense meetings, such as those between Prince Khalid bin Salman and the defense ministers of Sudan and Djibouti in 2024, underscore Saudi Arabia's commitment to military cooperation in the region.

As the Red Sea is critical to Saudi Arabia's tourism sector and maritime trade, the Kingdom [established](#) the Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden to defend maritime interests. This alliance includes Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia. In 2022, Saudi Arabia hosted joint naval exercises with several council members, focusing on counterterrorism and maritime [security](#). Through these [diplomatic](#) and military efforts, Saudi Arabia continues to position itself as a key security player in the Horn of



Africa, whilst defending its ambitions for the Red Sea.

The Kingdom's investments in the Horn strengthen bilateral ties while also realizing food security goals. Due to its limited agricultural capacity, Saudi Arabia imports approximately 80% of its food. The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine caused food prices to soar and reiterated the Kingdom's vulnerability to global supply chains and food imports. Thus, Riyadh seeks agricultural opportunities in Somalia and Sudan, due to their vast arable land and geographical proximity. In 2021, Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported a 400 million USD initiative to boost Sudan's agricultural production and increase bilateral [trade](#).

Port facilities and logistics are critical to food trade and contribute to Saudi Arabia's push for logistics investments in the Horn. In 2024, Riyadh inked a deal to establish a logistics hub in Djibouti, and in 2025, it expressed interest in [developing](#) Eritrea's Assab Port. Ultimately, these efforts stimulate economic growth, expand trade capacity, and secure more direct access to African markets. They also nurture bilateral relations while enacting Saudi Arabia's economic diversification into the non-oil sector.

Saudi Arabia is also leveraging soft power to build influence and address the root causes of instability. Through humanitarian initiatives and development aid, the Kingdom seeks to foster goodwill and reduce the appeal of extremist movements. In 2024, Riyadh signed a multilateral agreement with Somalia and the OPEC Fund to support post-pandemic economic [recovery](#). That same year, the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre [committed](#) \$5 million to combat food insecurity in Somalia, a country where economic despair can fuel

insurgencies and banditry. These humanitarian efforts help stabilize fragile states while enhancing Saudi Arabia's role as a responsible regional actor.

The Kingdom uses mediation as an agent of soft diplomacy, emerging as a voice of reason in conflicts. In 2018, King Salman chaired the Jeddah Peace Accords between Eritrea and Ethiopia, ending a bitter conflict and re-establishing 20-year dormant trade routes and land [borders](#). By brokering these accords, Saudi Arabia demonstrated its diplomatic capabilities and rising regional influence.

### UAE's Strategy and Investments

The Horn of Africa is instrumental for the UAE's economic, geopolitical, and security ambitions. As part of its Vision 2031, which aims to continue the UAE's reduction of reliance on oil by diversifying the economy, the UAE has sought to expand into new sectors such as logistics, trade, agriculture, and infrastructure. The economies in the Horn enable the UAE to reach new markets and transform into a global trading hub.

Economically, the UAE's interest in the Horn is centered on port development and control of maritime trade routes. The Red Sea is one of the world's most important commercial waterways, linking markets across Africa, Asia, and Europe. Capitalizing on this, the UAE has invested heavily in regional port [infrastructure](#). Notably, state-backed entities like DP World and Abu Dhabi Ports have spearheaded major developments, including the 442 million USD Berbera Port in [Somaliland](#). This joint venture positions Berbera as a vital gateway for landlocked Ethiopia, which currently depends on Djibouti for over 95% of its imports. While DP World also managed Djibouti's Doraleh Port from 2006 to 2018, the UAE lost this asset when the Djiboutian government





nationalized the port and handed control to a Chinese operator, reflecting the region's intense geopolitical [competition](#).

Security considerations also play a central role in the UAE's strategy. The region's volatility is marked by civil conflict, violent extremism, piracy, and terrorism, which directly threaten the UAE's economic infrastructure. As a result, the UAE has established military bases in key locations such as Eritrea and Somaliland, with past efforts to open a [base](#) in Djibouti. These outposts serve dual purposes: protecting maritime trade from piracy and extremist threats, and supporting broader military objectives, including operations during the Yemen conflict. For example, the Assab base in Eritrea previously served as a launchpad for air and naval strikes against Houthi factions. More recently, the UAE deployed military radars in the semi-autonomous Puntland in Somalia to detect potential drone and missile attacks from Houthi [rebels](#).

The UAE supports long-term partnerships by building on its bilateral economic ties, notably through infrastructure and agriculture investments, as it has done in [Ethiopia](#). For instance, the UAE-based EAP is furthering economic ties with Ethiopia by establishing a \$200 million wheat [farm](#). Meanwhile, DP World partnered with Ethiopia to build a highway from Berbera, Somaliland, to the Ethiopian border, underscoring the breadth of their economic cooperation. Both endeavors raise the UAE's influence and satisfy its wider regional goals to secure trade and trading routes in the Horn of Africa.

Furthermore, Ethiopia has entertained recognizing Somaliland in exchange for access to the DP World-developed Berbera Port. As the UAE was a driving force behind these negotiations, it demonstrates how its

economic investments have granted it leverage in the region to advance its strategic [objectives](#). By increasing its footprint across key countries and territories—such as Eritrea, Sudan, and Somaliland—the UAE aims to assert itself in the region and counter the influence of rivals, including Qatar, Turkey, Iran, and China.

### **Qatar's Strategy and Investments**

For Qatar, the Horn of Africa presents an opportunity to expand its diplomatic influence and assert itself on the global stage, especially in light of Saudi Arabia and the UAE's rising influence in the region. Similar to these states, Doha has equally leveraged economic investments, humanitarian diplomacy, and political alliances to realize its goals in the Horn.

In 2017, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt severed diplomatic ties with Qatar and imposed a land, sea, and air blockade following political [disagreements](#). As Qatar became economically and diplomatically isolated, it formed new alliances with Turkey, aligning their political and economic interests across the Horn of Africa. Both countries supported movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, in Somalia, which put them at odds with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. At the onset of the blockade, Saudi Arabia and the UAE persuaded Djibouti and Eritrea to downgrade diplomatic ties with Qatar, while Qatar [strengthened](#) its ties with Somalia. As a result, the Horn of Africa became a proxy battleground where Gulf and regional powers competed for [influence](#).

Doha has also sought to develop its regional economic ties by building infrastructure and logistics. In 2017, Qatar's Public Works Authority signed a \$165 million agreement with Somalia's government for infrastructure and construction. In 2021, it expressed



interest in developing the Hobyo Port in Somalia near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Although the port was awarded to Turkish-based Metag Holding, Qatar's pursuit of the project underscores its ambition to establish a foothold in the region and counter the UAE's lead in port [operations](#) across Africa. Turkey's role in the port aligns with the broader Qatar-Turkey strategy to counterbalance UAE and Saudi influence.

Food security concerns contribute to Qatar's presence in the Horn. Food price inflation from the 2008 financial crisis was an early warning of the Gulf states' susceptibility to volatile global supply chains. Therefore, it began investing in farmland across Sudan and Ethiopia to ensure reliable sources for agricultural products. In 2018, Hassad Food, a Qatar Investment Authority subsidiary, invested 500 million USD into Sudan's food sector by partnering with local Sudanese [companies](#). This partnership addresses food security challenges while contributing to the domestic economy and providing job opportunities in Sudan. Ultimately, this presents a mutually beneficial arrangement, strengthening relations between the two countries.

Humanitarian assistance has become another cornerstone of Qatar's foreign policy in the Horn of Africa. By providing aid, Doha has sought to build a positive image and forge strong bilateral ties. For instance, in 2021, Qatar pledged \$12 million to combat hunger and malnutrition in Somalia. Through the Qatar Red Crescent, it has funded numerous health, education, and economic empowerment [projects](#), particularly in Somalia and Sudan. This form of soft power helps Qatar build trust with local populations and governments while reinforcing its geopolitical footprint.

Another key instrument of Qatar's soft power is its role as a mediator. In late 2020, Somalia cut diplomatic ties with Kenya, accusing it of interfering in its internal affairs. Doha used its diplomatic influence to restore relations between the two countries within six months. In another instance, tensions between Somalia and Ethiopia soured when Somaliland agreed to lease a portion of its coastline to Ethiopia for commercial and military use. As Somalia does not recognize Somaliland's independence, Addis Ababa viewed the agreement as an affront to its sovereignty.

Qatar and Turkey worked in concert to mediate accords between Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani initiated the diplomatic effort and held private conversations with both East African leaders to work towards [areas](#) of "common concern." Turkish President Recep Erdogan continued the effort, and chaired peace [talks](#) between President Mohamud and Prime Minister Ahmed, culminating in a "historic reconciliation." Qatar has underscored its diplomatic influence in the Horn and its ability to cooperate with various stakeholders, through such successful mediation campaigns. Like humanitarian aid, mediation enables Qatar to position itself as a constructive actor and bolster its influence in the global world order.

### **Converging Economic Agendas and Diverging Alliances**

The Gulf states recognize the economic and strategic significance of the Horn of Africa, particularly in its importance for maritime security, trade routes, and agricultural supply chains. As such, they have implemented similar strategies aimed at strengthening their ties and influence in the region. Notably,



Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have all invested in agriculture and logistics in Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea, among others, to realize their economic diversification goals and address food insecurity challenges. At times, this is done through joint efforts as when Saudi Arabia and the UAE announced a joint \$400 million fund in 2021 for Sudan's agricultural sector, demonstrating how their interests and strategies can align with one [another](#). This investment follows Qatar's Hassad Food ventures in Sudan's agriculture in 2018, signaling a race for access to the region's resources. The three Gulf states have also all vied for access to ports in the Horn, with Qatar focusing on Somalia; the UAE on Djibouti and Somaliland; and Saudi Arabia's attempts in Eritrea.

Beyond direct investments, Gulf states have recognized the importance and benefits of soft power in their African relations. Qatar and Saudi Arabia have championed aid development as a tool furthering their strategies in the Horn of Africa. KSRelief and Qatar Charity have made charitable donations to address varying regional insecurities influencing health, education, and malnutrition, impacting the most vulnerable populations in the Horn. In March 2025, KSrelief [distributed](#) food baskets to nearly 10,000 civilians in Djibouti to "enhance food security" in a "friendly nation," and shelter kits to 3,000 displaced families in [Somalia](#). In the same spirit, Qatar Charity launched a healthcare campaign that sponsored heart [surgeries](#) for vulnerable children in Somalia, which Somalia's Health Minister lauded as a "model of humanitarian solidarity." These humanitarian initiatives build on the positive rapport between Gulf states, local governments, and populations and buttress their wider aims for deeper cooperation with countries in the Horn.

Although their strategies share similarities, the Gulf powers diverge in their regional alliances, which have turned the Horn of Africa into a proxy battleground with negligible consequences for their broader goals. Turning to Somalia, Qatar and Turkey have formed alliances with the Federal Government in Mogadishu, whereas the UAE has strengthened its economic and security ties with the semi-autonomous Puntland and the self-declared independent Somaliland.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations: What Lies Ahead**

Maintaining stability in the Horn of Africa is crucial for the Gulf region's strategic and economic interests, especially maritime trade, the security of their investments in other sectors, and, for Saudi Arabia, its tourism agenda for NEOM. Accordingly, Gulf states should harmonize their efforts by adopting a multilateral approach to the region. The GCC-Secretariat should be emboldened and act as the vehicle to address conflict in the Horn on behalf of the Gulf.

Furthermore, the Red Sea Council could extend memberships to Qatar and the UAE, which are interested in maintaining maritime security and holding geopolitical influence in the Horn. Their participation in the council will further realize its goal for collective coordination. Presently, the 2022 naval exercises are the council's most visible contributions to maritime security. Nevertheless, they do not go far enough to enforce [counterattacks](#). The Council could require its members to commit naval forces to a permanent task force guarding the Red Sea.

The Horn of Africa remains a region of immense opportunity, shadowed by chronic instability. For the Gulf states - particularly



the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar - the region presents a strategic corridor for trade, a source of food security, and a battleground for geopolitical influence. However, their competing agendas, overlapping alliances, and divergent strategies risk undermining long-term stability. Piracy, terrorism, proxy warfare, and state fragility continue to challenge their investments and threaten maritime security. Left unaddressed, these dynamics could disrupt global trade and spill over into broader regional conflicts.

The Gulf states must shift from fragmented competition to coordinated engagement to move forward. First, they should harmonize their regional policies, especially in conflict-prone states like Sudan and Somalia. A unified Gulf position would bolster peacebuilding efforts and reduce contradictory influences that fuel instability.

Second, Qatar and the UAE should be formally included in the Red Sea Council, recognizing their established interests in maritime security. Broadening membership would improve coordination and foster collective responsibility among coastal and investing states.

Third, the Red Sea Council should evolve beyond a symbolic body into an active maritime security alliance, with member states contributing naval assets to a joint Red Sea Task Force under a unified defense strategy. Finally, economic diplomacy should be tied to stabilization efforts. Investing in infrastructure, agriculture, and trade should go hand-in-hand with local capacity-building and governance support, ensuring Gulf influence promotes long-term resilience rather than dependency.



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