



THE PARTING OF THE RED SEA. HOW THE HORN OF AFRICA IS BECOMING A PROXY FOR GULF RIVALRIES

Elisa Marra

Mounting internal antagonism, as well as the urgency of diversifying oil-based economies, are the main drivers pushing Gulf powers to forge new alliances and expand their sphere of influence. Consequently, over the last few years, Gulf monarchies have laid eyes on the Red Sea Corridor and the Horn of Africa to implement new military bases and commercial ports. The neighbourhood can be the key to a rapid economic expansion in Africa. However, while the region can become the Gulf's newest golden goose, an extensive Gulf state presence may leave the area floundering and jeopardize its long-term stability. Therefore, this paper aims at inquiring into this latter-day scramble for Africa, by briefly investigating both the potential and the risks that the



broadening relations between oil-rich Gulf countries and the Horn might trigger.

It is no mystery that unbridled capitalism is the driving force piloting all Gulf operations, both internal and external ones. Though, what could be hard to fathom is how Gulf powers can fight over a region whose countries combined do not even account for half the GDP of Saudi Arabia alone. Over the last decade, indeed, geopolitical relevancies, strategic interests, and internal oppositions pushed Gulf policymakers to change their focus of attention and start looking west. As a matter of fact, they began directing their spheres of influence towards the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) and, more specifically, to the specific side on the western coast of the Red Sea Corridor, which is known as the Horn of Africa. This area, which is a crossroad for international trade, can become the Gulf's newest gold mine, because of its economic and geographic massive potential. Therefore, Gulf powers are competing to forge new alliances and stipulate new military agreements with the Horn countries, to extend their influence in the Red Sea Corridor and benefit from its future economic growth. However, since the Horn of Africa is also a politically volatile region, intra-Gulf competition in the area can further exasperate its internal fractions and economic inequalities. Notably, as Larsen and Stepputat correctly remark, Gulf monarchies "have been exporting their feud to a potentially combustible region"¹.

The Red Sea Corridor is rapidly becoming an investment hub because of its growing geopolitical relevance.² It indeed not only borders with African and Middle Eastern countries, but it is also the

¹Larsen, Jessica, and Finn Stepputat. "Gulf State Rivalries in the Horn of Africa: Time for a Red Sea Policy?" *Danish Institute for International Studies*, 1 May 2019. www.diis.dk/en/research/gulf-state-rivalries-in-the-horn-of-africa-time-a-red-sea-policy

²"The Horn of Africa and the Gulf: The Ebb and Flow of Power." *The Africa Report.com*, The Africa Report, 16 Feb. 2021. www.theafricareport.com/66183/the-horn-of-africa-and-the-gulf-the-ebb-and-flow-of-power/



world's oldest maritime route connecting Europe to Africa and Asia. According to recent data (2016), almost 10% of all global trade crosses its waters annually and the volume of traffic is bound to increase as soon as the Suez Canal's capacity is enhanced.³ A report by the Fares Center claims: "by 2050, Red Sea GDP is [projected](#) to more than triple, increasing from \$1.8 trillion to \$6.1 trillion, and trade is expected to grow more than five times, from \$881 billion to \$4.7 trillion."⁴ However, despite its huge economic potential, extreme political fragility and economic stagnation are the main patterns shaping the regional power balance. These factors limit local actors' negotiating power and determine their enormous financial needs.⁵ In this context, Gulf monarchies competing for security and energy interests in the area are exploiting its regional instability and power vacuum to project their military might onto the neighbourhood.

Relations between the Gulf and the Horn date back in time. Before 2011, the two regions were mostly tied by economic and cultural exchanges. Furthermore, Gulf monarchies in need of sowing the seeds of post-oil economies injected considerable assets into the development of infrastructures as well as into arable land for the advancement of their food security programmes. However, since then, Gulf monarchies' agendas in the region shifted to a more political and security strategy.⁶ The factors that caused this transition are several. With the outbreak of the Arab Spring turmoil in 2011 and the Yemen war in 2014, partner competition in the

³Al-Rasheed, Fahd. "Red Sea - Artery of Global Trade." *Arab News*, 12 Feb. 2016. www.arabnews.com/columns/news/879221

⁴Heath, Nathanael C. "A Red Sea Geopolitics Primer." *The Fares Center*, 19 June 2020. www.sites.tufts.edu/farescenter/a-red-sea-geopolitics-primer/

⁵Beyene, AbdetaDribssa. "The Horn of Africa and the Gulf: Shifting Power Plays in the Red Sea." *The Africa Report.com*, The Africa Report, 2 Dec. 2020. www.theafricareport.com/50499/the-horn-of-africa-and-the-gulf-shifting-power-plays-in-the-red-sea/

⁶BrookingsInstitution, director. *Red Sea Rivalries: The Gulf, the Horn, and the New Geopolitics of the Red Sea*. YouTube, YouTube, 19 Apr. 2019. www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDADZxk8Xd8



Horn became a militarised issue that pushed Gulf powers to seek new allies. Nevertheless, the rush for new partnerships resulted in a severe intra-Gulf rupture. On the one hand, the imperative of countering Iranian influence in the region was the main driver leading the Saudi-Emirati axis, which therefore favoured governments headed by the Muslim Brotherhood or its branches. On the other hand, Qatar, which supported Islamist forces along with Turkey, was not as interested in shoving back Teheran's influence. Later on, in 2017, the crisis of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) emerged - that resulted in the embargo on Qatar - which further accelerated existing dynamics and urged powers to win new allies.⁷

Alongside this background, Gulf powers started pivoting towards the Horn of Africa, where intra-Gulf rivalries entered the realm of maritime politics. Over the last decade, the former desire of exploiting the area's economic potential rapidly shifted towards the pressing need of establishing military presence along the shores of the Red Sea corridor. As researcher Eleonora Ardemagni claimed in her recent paper for ISPI: "Gulf powers' maritime competition in the WIO crafts fresh alignments with Asian and Eastern African players (...) This intra-Gulf competition can be traced along three vectors of geostrategic influence: commercial ports, military agreements and bases, and choke-points."⁸ Notably, Gulf powers' investments in ports and maritime structures in the Horn of Africa are part of large and ambitious plans, such as the Saudi "Vision

⁷"Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact." *International Crisis Group*, 19 Sept. 2019. www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/206-intra-gulf-competition-africas-horn-lessening-impact

⁸Ardemagni, Eleonora. "Gulf Powers: Maritime Rivalry in the Western Indian Ocean." *ISPI Istituto per Gli Studi Di Geopolitica Internazionale*, 13 Apr. 2018. www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/gulf-powers-maritime-rivalry-western-indian-ocean-20212



2030”⁹ or the “Sultanate of Oman Logistics Strategy 2040”¹⁰; both projects aim for economic diversifications of countries that are massively dependent on oil structures. Nevertheless, Gulf monarchies also infuse large amounts of capital in humanitarian aid, conflict resolutions, and peacekeeping missions in the region, demonstrating that their interest in the area goes way beyond mere military and commercial partnerships.¹¹ Distinctly, according to the Middle East Institute, between 2000 and 2017, Gulf powers invested \$13 billion in the Horn of Africa and \$6.6 billion in development assistance.¹²

Regrettably, Gulf-Horn relationships are highly asymmetrical. Even though the Horn countries see the Gulf ones as potential sponsors as well as fuel for economic growth, Gulf monarchies in the region are pursuing their narrow agendas and adjusting the political landscape of the Red Sea Basin in their own favour. In the long run, this could not only limit the Horn governments’ political grip, but it could also exacerbate the area’s internal inequalities. In fact, the Gulf’s interventionist approach in the Horn could impact the region’s stability and threaten its already volatile political and social

⁹ “National Transformation Program.” *National Transformation Program | Saudi Vision 2030*, Kingdom of Saudi

Arabia. www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/programs/NTP

¹⁰“Briefings from Oman Logistics.” *Ithraa.com*, Public Authority for Investment Promotion & Export

Development. www.ithraa.om/portals/0/IthraaPDF/Brochures/PDF/ithraa_briefings_logistics_eng_AW.pdf

¹¹ Mahmood, Omar S. “The Middle East's Complicated Engagement in the Horn of Africa.” *United States Institute of Peace*, 28 Jan. 2020.

www.usip.org/publications/2020/01/middle-east-s-complicated-engagement-horn-africa

Stones, Adrian, and Yigal Chazan. “Gulf Rivalries Could Impact Horn of Africa's Stability: Adrian Stones.” *The Arab Weekly*, 13 July 2020.

www.thearabweekly.com/gulf-rivalries-could-impact-horn-africas-stability

¹²Calabrese, John. “The Bab El-Mandeb Strait: Regional and Great Power Rivalries on the Shores of the Red Sea.” *Middle East Institute*, 29 Jan. 2020.

www.mei.edu/publications/bab-el-mandeb-strait-regional-and-great-power-rivalries-shores-red-sea



conditions.¹³ In addition to that, the GCC monarchies' increasing partnerships with local authorities in critical infrastructures are de facto a strategic move to delimitate their enemies' influence in the Horn. Therefore, it is safe to say that the Horn is becoming a proxy to the GCC internal rivalries.¹⁴

The question that naturally arises is: how can the Gulfs' interference alter the fragile social and political equilibrium of the Horn of Africa?

In foreign policy, Gulf powers usually tend to design and support state structures that are similar to their own. For instance, the Saudi-Emirati coalition usually supports personality-driven centralised governments. These administrations consist of weak or non-existent democratic institutions and usually tend to marginalise citizens' active participation in the social and political life of the country. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and the UAE often tend to hijack the outbreak of revolutionary movements that could pave the way for the ascent of political Islam, supported by the Qatar-Turkey axis.¹⁵ The axis, on the contrary, usually supports popular uprisings, which they see as a way for the Muslim Brotherhood or its affiliates to gain political power.¹⁶

In addition to that, the Gulf's interference may hinder a country's political transition into democratic administrations and might even trigger conflict. It is the case of Sudan, by way of example, which left behind, in 2019, almost three decades of authoritarian rule.

¹³Vertin, Zach. "Red Sea Rivalries: the Gulf, the Horn & the New Geopolitics of the Red Sea." *Brookings Doha Center*, June 2019.

www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Red-Sea-Rivalries.-The-Gulf-The-Horn-and-the-New-Geopolitics-of-the-Red-Sea-English-pdf.pdf

¹⁴Oneko, Sella. "Arab Gulf States in the Horn of Africa: What Role Do They Play?" *Deutsche Welle*, 23 Sept. 2018. www.dw.com/en/arab-gulf-states-in-the-horn-of-africa-what-role-do-they-play/a-45602930

¹⁵"Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact." *International Crisis Group*, 19 Sept. 2019. www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/206-intra-gulf-competition-africas-horn-lessening-impact

¹⁶"Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact." *International Crisis Group*, 19 Sept. 2019. www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/206-intra-gulf-competition-africas-horn-lessening-impact



Saudi Arabia and the UAE long supported al-Bashir's dictatorship in Sudan, which eventually led to the Sudanese Revolution in 2018-2019. Again, for instance, in Somalia, which suffers from one of the most fragile political and social contexts of the last decade, Abu Dhabi was accused of having ties with the terrorist group al-Shabaab: weakening the already-fragile government's hold on the country's security situation and providing the group with capital to pursue their violent activities.¹⁷

To sum up, over the last decade, Gulf powers have become increasingly involved in the Horn of Africa. The substantial economic and geostrategic potential of the western coast of the Red Sea Corridor is the main feature attracting Gulf monarchies. In addition to that, in the vision of a post-oil economy, the latter have been pouring considerable sums of money into the development of infrastructures in the Horn of Africa. These regions, could be fundamental for oil-dependent Gulf monarchies, which are defining and implementing new action plans in order to diversify their economies. With this particular regard, the countries of the Arabian Peninsula are incrementally competing among each other to forge new alliances with local governments or opposition groups.

Therefore, a prolonged Gulf presence in the Horn of Africa could threaten the region's stability. Undoubtedly, the area's social and political conditions are already volatile, due to large economic discrepancies and decades of authoritarian rule, among other factors. In addition to that, becoming the new battlefield for an intra-Gulf competition may not only bolster civil unrest and undermine local equilibriums, it could also alter maritime balances and exacerbate local enmities. This would have severe implications for the region's security in the near future.

¹⁷Larsen, Jessica, and Finn Stepputat. "Gulf State Rivalries in the Horn of Africa: Time for a Red Sea Policy?" *Danish Institute for International Studies*, 1 May 2019. www.diiis.dk/en/research/gulf-state-rivalries-in-the-horn-of-africa-time-a-red-sea-policy