

Beyond Conflict Intervention: Unmasking Gulf Supremacy Rivalries and Strategic Interests in the Horn of Africa

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, the Horn of Africa has emerged as a strategic arena for Gulf states seeking to extend their power and influence beyond the Arabian Peninsula. While Gulf states defend their continued infiltration in the Horn of Africa on grounds of conflict intervention, a more critical analysis reveals the extension of their regional supremacy rivalries, economic and security imperatives as the main motivating factors. Endowed with mineral-rich countries, proximity to strategic maritime routes, extensive arable land, and opportunities for military expansion, the Horn of Africa has been an opportune ground for Gulf states' pursuits. This strategic penetration has produced a complex intersection of external rivalries with local conflicts. Rivalry among dominant Gulf countries has shaped conflict dynamics by influencing local actors, deepening internal divisions and complicating chances of amicable resolution of conflicts in the fragile states in the Horn of Africa. Based on the Regional Security Complex Theory developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, the study demonstrates that the HoA and the Gulf are geographically proximate regions with deep security interdependence in which their national security concerns are so intertwined that they cannot meaningfully be analyzed or resolved in isolation. By interrogating the hidden agendas underlying Gulf interventions, this study examines how Gulf supremacy rivalries shape conflict dynamics in the Horn of Africa and assesses the subsequent impacts of such interventions. To achieve sustainable peace in the Horn of Africa, the study recommends transparent and inclusive interventions that transcend elite interests and prioritize community-level benefits.

Keywords: Infiltration, Conflict Intervention, Supremacy Rivalries

INTRODUCTION

In a narrow sense, the Horn of Africa (HoA) comprises of four countries – Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti and Eritrea while in a broader sense, it includes Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda and Kenya (Long, 2024). The region is a hotbed of deep-rooted inter-state and intra-state conflicts. Somalia, for instance, has endured political instability since the collapse of its central government in the early 1990s. Despite concerted stabilization efforts in the recent past, the country is still bedeviled by persistent separatist movements that have resulted in the selfdeclared Somaliland and a semi-autonomous Puntland. Ethiopia, on the other hand, contends with domestic instability in the Tigray region, which has had significant spill-over effects on the security and politics of the neighbouring countries. Additionally, Ethiopia is also engaged in numerous territorial disputes with her neighbours, with allegation of infringing on Somali's sovereignty; contestations over transboundary resource with Sudan; and cross-border ethnic rivalries and military supremacy battles with Eritrea. Sudan continues to live through a protracted transition characterized by attempts of the military to reassert its power in a contested political space following the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir. Both Sudan and South Sudan have experienced deep factionalisms, which are part of the causes of domestic and regional instabilities (Wilson, 2025; Dubale, 2024). The Gulf countries have increasingly viewed these developments as threats to their security and economic interests, necessitating their interventions.

Notwithstanding the numerous conflicts, the region carries significant geopolitical and economic advantages. Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, the HoA is strategically located at the crossroads of critical global trade routes that link the African, Asian and European markets. Moreover, it is richly endowed with natural resources, vast arable land, huge consumer market and enormous industrial potential. According to Wilson

(2025), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that 15% of global trade passes through this route, bolstering the region's strategic relevance in global geopolitics. These factors make the HoA attractive to external actors, both regional and international, seeking to enhance their influence and power. To the Gulf countries, in particular, the HoA remains a geostrategic hotspot for their economic and security pursuits.

The Gulf comprise of the seven countries – Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – bordering the Persian Gulf in the Arabian Peninsula. Of the seven, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar stand out, not only as the political and economic heavyweights, but also as the most ambitious in expanding their sphere of influence outside the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This quest to expand their influence is largely linked to the Arab Spring, a wave of pro-democracy protests and uprisings in MENA between 2010 and 2012, and the subsequent fall of authoritarian regimes in North Africa. The United States (US), their major ally, was in full support of the uprisings, for instance, in Egypt and Tunisia, and welcomed the rise of Muslim Brotherhood in the two countries (Shiferaw, 2016). It was, therefore, clear to the Gulf monarchs that their national interests and that of their major ally were no longer synchronized. Henceforth, Gulf countries have embarked on diversifying their political and economic allies and assumed a more proactive role in regional affairs, all in a bid to improve their international relevance. Given the geographical proximity and cultural similitude with the HoA, the latter became a prime site for Gulf's strategic alliances and an arena to pursue its interests.

It is on this basis that, in the last two decades, the Gulf countries have stepped up their involvement in the HoA, notably in conflict intervention. Gulf countries consider their stability to be inextricably linked to that of the HoA, making it one of their strategic priorities. Lyammouri (2018) attributes the rise of Gulf's prominence in the HoA to the conspicuous absence of traditional Western peace brokers, who have shown little or no interest in the protracting conflicts in the region. The challenge is compounded by the fact that the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have exhibited limited conflict response capacity, partly due to their inherent operational and structural challenges. As such, the Gulf countries have seized the opportunity to fill in the vacuum, as underscored by their willingness to host some of the important peace summits regarding the HoA. According to Laako & Hatab (2024), the Gulf states have leveraged on their vast financial resources and deep historical and cultural ties with the HoA to outpace other international actors as they position themselves as key mediators in the HoA.

Both regions recognize that peace and security are imperative for their political and economic well-being. They face shared security concerns emanating from armed conflicts, transnational terrorist networks and the consequent humanitarian crises. Also, the Gulf is constantly concerned with the influx of forced migrants from the HoA due to the persistent conflicts (Kinkoh, 2024). It is also worth noting, as argued by Marangio (2024), that most countries engaging the HoA are mostly keen on safeguarding their economic interests, including access to natural resources. The Gulf is no exception to this. Over and above these shared interests, Gulf states have leveraged their shared history, culture, and Islamic values to advance their agenda and outwit their competitors in the HoA (Gaid, 2022). They have capitalized on Islamic soft power approach to cut a niche in cultural cooperation, humanitarian and developmental assistance in the HoA. To a large extent, albeit controversial, this engagement has been mutually beneficial to the two regions. On the one hand, the HoA is eager to collaborate with the Gulf, not only to address the contemporary security threats it contends with, but also to fill in their infrastructural deficits from the massive investments from the Gulf. On the other hand, apart from guaranteeing their domestic security through mitigating security threats in the HoA, the Gulf has benefited immensely through establishing new allies, diversifying their economies and positioning itself as an emerging regional and international stakeholder.

METHODOLOGY

The study relied exclusively on secondary sources, systematically selected for credibility and relevance. Through systematic literature review and thematic analysis, it interrogated how Gulf supremacy rivalries are externalized into proxy engagements that reshape conflict dynamics and regional security structures in the Horn of Africa.

This study is based on Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). It provides a structural framework for understanding how geographically proximate states form clusters of security interdependence in which their national security concerns are so intertwined that they cannot meaningfully be analyzed or resolved in isolation (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). Rather than conceptualizing the HoA and the Gulf as distinct geopolitical theatres, this study submits that they are interlinked trans-regional security systems structured around the Red Sea corridor. Applying this logic to the Red Sea basin reveals dense patterns of interdependence between the Gulf and the Horn. Political instability in Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, or Djibouti is not merely a localized crisis: it generates direct externalities for Gulf monarchies whose economic and regime survival are closely tied to maritime flows and ideological stability. Thus, Gulf engagement in the HoA cannot be reduced to opportunistic expansionism alone but it reflects structural security interdependence.

Secondly, RSCT holds that threats travel more intensely across short distances than across long ones, and proximity generates patterns of amity, rivalry, and alignment that define regional security structures (Walsh, 2020). In this context, the Bab el-Mandeb corridor fuses three inseparable security dimensions – Gulf energy security, Horn political fragility, and global trade circulation. With a significant percentage of global maritime commerce transiting this chokepoint, disruptions originating in the Horn directly affect Gulf economic lifelines and broader international markets. In line with theory's insight that threats diffuse most intensely across contiguous spaces, instability in the HoA produces immediate strategic recalibrations in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Doha. Civil war in Sudan, state fragmentation in Somalia, or military tensions involving Eritrea and Djibouti reverberate across the Red Sea, reshaping Gulf security doctrines (Sharif, 2023; Amable, 2022). The result is not two isolated regional systems, but a fused security architecture.

Gulf's Strategic Interests in the Horn of Africa

Gulf countries have played a significant role in promoting peace and stability in the HoA. This is evident through their initiatives in mediation and peace talks, supporting regional security programs, training and equipping security personnel and enhancing security through diverse investments across various sectors. In 2023, Saudi Arabia played a significant role in clinching the Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of

Sudan. This was in an attempt to quell the conflict between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), the two warring factions in Sudan. Qatar, while mediating various inter-state conflicts in the HoA, has dared to venture where traditional power brokers have struggled. In 1999, she brokered an agreement between Sudan and Eritrea, restoring relations that had stalled since 1994. In the 2000s, Qatar was an intermediary between the warring factions in Somalia; between Djibouti and Eritrea (2008) and between Kenya and Somalia in (2021). Saudi Arabia and the UAE were in the limelight for brokering the Jeddah Peace Agreement, restoring relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea (2018), two major rivals in the HoA (Kinkoh, 2024; Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 2024). Although most of the initiatives have not been successful, they have contributed to enhancing the role of these states as important actors in international mediation.

Gulf countries have contributed to a more stable and secure environment in the HoA by supporting regional security frameworks. Saudi Arabia and UEA have stepped up their efforts of securing strategic maritime routes, especially in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. This is through the establishment of military outposts in Eritrea and Somaliland with an aim of containing piracy and terrorism. This increased military foothold not only enhances Gulf's geopolitical influence but also responds to shared threats in the HoA and the Gulf. Gulf states have also been involved in training and equipping local security forces in the HoA. For example, the UAE has provided extensive support to the Puntland Maritime Police Force and Somaliland's military. Qatar has invested in training and equipping security forces in Somalia to enhance their capacity to combat piracy and terrorism. These efforts have been crucial in reinforcing regional security. Moreover, Gulf countries have also invested significantly in developmental peace. This is by investing in projects aimed at improving infrastructure, healthcare and education in the HoA. Saudi Arabia, through the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD) supports sectors in agribusiness, energy, mining, transport and tourism. Qatar has been involved in construction of Hoby port in Somalia and funding the expansion of the Port of Mombasa in Kenya (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025; Kinkoh, 2024). These investments are important to the Gulf countries as they help in diversifying their

economies and to the HoA, promoting sustainable peace by addressing some of the root causes of conflict, such as poverty and inadequate access to basic necessities.

However, the interventions have resulted in a mix of successes and failures. Gulf countries have a preference for bilateral to multilateral engagements. This has continually sidestepped important peace and conflict stakeholders in the region, hence minimizing chances of successful and constructive conflict resolution. The Jeddah Peace Agreement, for instance, was negotiated in the absence of both the AU and IGAD. Unfortunately, it is on the verge of collapse (Gaid, 2022). Secondly, the interventions have not been immune to the longstanding rivalries between the Gulf countries, which has only served to exacerbate conflicts in the HoA. In Sudan, SAF enjoys support from Saudi Arabia while UAE sides with RSF. The conflicting agendas and hidden interests by the two Gulf countries have significantly stalled efforts to find a lasting solution (Chome, 2025; Mosley, 2021). In addition, Somalia has expressed strong reservations against Qatar's working relationship with Somaliland, the unrecognized breakaway republic in Somalia. Just like in Sudan, this has dimmed chances of positive peace in the already delicate Somalia.

Apparently, conflict intervention is not the primary goal of the Gulf countries' presence in the HoA – it is a disguise to pursue economic interests which seem to be their main priority. Driven by their economic interests, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are emerging as generous development partners and the leading sources of capital and private sector engagement to the HoA. UAE, for instance, has an estimated investment of \$22 billion in non-security sectors in Sudan. South Sudan is the second largest recipient of UAE investments, primarily on an oil agreement valued at \$ 13 billion. Saudi Arabia's investments in the HoA are approximated at \$ 15.6 billion, mostly in energy, infrastructural and agricultural sectors. These investments are channeled through the SDF, with most them concentrated in Djibouti. Although Qatar does not have significant investments in the HoA, it has a pending 40,000-hectare agricultural project in Kenya and is a major financier to the SAF in Sudan's conflict (African Center for Strategic Studies, 2025; Donelli, 2020; Ayman, 2019). These three countries have enjoyed easy penetration into the HoA because, as Laako & Hatab (2024) and Shiferaw (2016) observe, their financial assistance is neither conditional on economic and political reforms as demanded by the Western partners nor resource-extractive like China's. This resonates very well with most HoA countries that are desperately in need of financial aid but cannot meet Western donor standards.

The foregoing notwithstanding, Chome (2025), highlights the transactional, interest-driven and personalized relations between the primary conflict actors in the HoA and the commercial elites from the Gulf, often disguised as power-brokers. The Gulf countries secure and sustain loyalty from the warring parties in the HoA through their petro-dollar wealth while the latter sustain violence in their countries using the same cash. This portrays the HoA as a political marketplace where commercial interests of the Gulf countries take precedence over peace in the HoA. The transactional relationship has marginalized diplomatic initiatives and hampered peace efforts by regional actors such as the AU and IGAD, further complicating peace efforts in the HoA. Wilson (2025) and Mosley (2021) affirm that this transactional approach goes beyond conflict intervention initiatives. To them, the Gulf countries are keen on strengthening maritime security in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, which in turn would create a conducive commercial environment for their investments in the HoA. By venturing into new economic sectors in the HoA such as logistics, agriculture and infrastructure, Gulf countries have an opportunity to diversify their economies and reduce reliance on oil revenues which have been plummeting since 2014 (Ayman, 2019).

Gulf Supremacy Rivalries and Conflict Dynamics in the Horn of Africa

The modern-day rivalry among Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar has its foundations in the political developments associated with the 2011 Arab Spring, which exposed differing visions of regional order. At the heart of this rivalry lies a competition for leadership within the Sunni Arab world, coupled with differing views on political Islam. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are explicitly opposed to Islamists and view the rise of Muslim Brotherhood and related groups as a direct threat to their stability and that of MENA. Their responses to the Arab Spring showed a concerted effort to contain Islamist political ambitions (Hilde, 2019). In particular, the UAE has initiated a global campaign that links political Islam to instability and depicting it as a threat to the stability of the Gulf region (Long, 2024). On the opposing side is Qatar, which has openly supported political Islamist

movements and established strong ties with Turkey. Qatar's support for political Islam and further providing a safe haven to its leaders triggered diplomatic stand-off with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, leading to a diplomatic fall-out in 2017 (Larsen & Stepputat, 2019). From an economic point of view, all the three states are pursuing diversification strategies that centre on logistics, aviation, and maritime expansion, further intensifying their rivalry. For instance, Qatar's growing profile in global aviation and shipping has quite often rattled the UAE, which has long dominated these sectors. Culmination of these rivalries produce a multidimensional contest for regional influence, directly shaping conflict dynamics and outcomes in the HoA.

Somalia is perhaps the most visible arena of Gulf rivalry. During the GCC crisis (2017), Somalia's political system split along Gulf-aligned lines. Qatar and Turkey invested heavily in Somalia's central government in Mogadishu, providing political finance, military aid, and institutional support (Mishra, 2019; Long, 2024). In contrast, the UAE established relations with breakaway federal states – Somaliland, Puntland, and Jubaland – thereby undermining the central government's efforts at building national unity. The 2018 seizure of UAE funds in Mogadishu and the subsequent withdrawal of their trainers further heightened tensions (International Crisis Group, 2018). As Mwangi (2024) submits, such alignments deepen factionalism and erode the prospects for sustainable peace, only exposing Somalia to further external manipulation. On the same note, Sudan offers another important arena where Gulf states' presence has been experienced heavily. Prior to the ouster of Omar al-Bashir, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were key supporters of his regime. Following his fall, they extended support to the Transitional Military Council (TMC) to deter the rise of a civilian government with perceived Islamist linkages (Freer, 2022). Despite subsequent Western pressure moderating their influence, their involvement strengthened military dominance and complicated Sudan's transition.

Further, Qatar's role as mediator in the Eritrea-Djibouti border dispute illustrates how Gulf rivalries directly impact local conflict dynamics. The sudden withdrawal of Qatar's peacekeepers in 2017, which was triggered by the GCC crisis, created a security vacuum that increased the risk of military escalation between the two neighbouring countries (Lyammouri, 2018; Kinkoh, 2024). The 2018 Ethiopia-Eritrea peace agreement, brokered in Jeddah by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, marked a notable moment of Gulf diplomatic activism (Mishra, 2019). The UAE's pledge of \$3 billion to Ethiopia and its military presence in Eritrea brought to the fore its broader maritime strategy. Qatar's earlier influence in Djibouti and mediation roles declined significantly after the diplomatic fall-out with Saudi Arabi and UAE. Moreover, the Yemen conflict expanded Gulf rivalries into the HoA through military recruitment, port access deals, and political alignments. Eritrea, Sudan, and Djibouti became entangled in the Saudi-UAE coalition (Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 2024; Shiferaw, 2016), linking domestic politics in the HoA to external geopolitical agendas.

The HoA increasingly mirrors the ideological and political divisions of the Gulf itself. The region has become an arena for Gulf rivalries and proxy wars. This has led to prolonged political instabilities by introducing external dynamics that favour conflict persistence. The HoA's vulnerability to Gulf infiltration owes to its fragile political systems. Notably, the resulting alignments in Somalia worsened internal divisions, empowering breakaway federal states to defy the central government, thereby undermining national unity goals. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar has become a defining feature of the HoA's conflict and security landscape. While Gulf states have occasionally contributed to diplomatic breakthroughs, such as the Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement, their competitive interventions more often fragment domestic politics, weaken regional governance mechanisms, militarize strategic maritime routes, and embolden authoritarian actors. As Freer (2022) asks whether Gulf states are cooperating or competing in the Horn, the evidence strongly suggests the dominance of competitive dynamics. These conditions collectively undermine the prospects for sustainable peace and regional stability.

Impacts of Gulf's Conflict Intervention in the Horn of Africa

Gulf rivalries have repeatedly led to the prolongation of conflicts across the HoA. The 2017 GCC crisis divided the region along the Saudi-UAE versus Qatar-Turkey axis, aggravating already fragile political environments in Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Sudan. When Eritrea and Djibouti aligned with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Qatar abruptly withdrew its peacekeepers, creating a security vacuum that fueled renewed tensions between the two states. Still, while the Gulf-brokered 2018 Ethiopia-Eritrea peace agreement promised short-term gains, Gaid

(2022) argues that it shifted political dynamics within Ethiopia, thus contributing indirectly to tensions that later escalated into the Tigray conflict. The fact that the UAE supplied drones and other weapons to Ethiopia further escalated the conflict, altering battlefield outcomes and prolonging violence. In Somalia, opposing Gulf alignments intensified political polarization. With the UAE supporting breakaway federal states and Qatar aligning with the central government, rival power centers were created which further dimmed prospects for national reconciliation (Donelli, 2020; Hilde, 2019). In each of these cases, Gulf involvement rarely addressed the underlying causes but has instead entrenched competing factions and extended cycles of armed conflict in the HoA.

Gulf states often engage in the HoA through elite-driven, personalized bilateral diplomacy that bypasses established regional institutional frameworks. This approach undermines governance by empowering rebel groups and authoritarian leaders, encouraging patronage politics, and weakening formal state institutions. In Somalia, the UAE's direct engagement with Somaliland, Puntland, and other breakaway federal states ignited constitutional disputes and weakened the country's fragile federal structure. Qatar's political and financial support for particular Somali leaders further reinforced elite competition, consolidating power in narrow networks rather than strengthening state institutions. Similar patterns emerged in Sudan, where Gulf support for competing military factions eroded chances for a smooth transition and reduced prospects for democratic consolidation (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025; Lyammouri, 2018). Ultimately, these interventions dilute sovereign governance, fragment national authority, and distort political incentives, often pushing leaders toward short-term survival strategies rather than institutional development.

Gulf geopolitical rivalry has reshaped alliances and produced new regional arrangements that destabilize the HoA. For instance, Saudi Arabia's Red Sea security strategy involves Djibouti and Eritrea, while the UAE has expanded economic and security partnerships with Ethiopia, as seen in recent disputes surrounding Ethiopia's Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Somaliland. The region has thus become a theatre for Gulf competition, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE seeking to counter Qatar's influence while Qatar capitalizes on mediation and its financial capabilities to expand its footprint. Somalia's attempt to remain neutral during the GCC crisis provoked retaliatory measures from the UAE, disrupting security cooperation and aggravating internal political tensions (Mahmood, 2020; Carbone, 2020). These evolving external alignments contribute to a volatile peace and security environment where domestic disputes easily escalate into regional crises. As Gulf states re-shape alliances based on shifting geopolitical priorities, the HoA remains vulnerable to external shocks that undermine long-term regional stability.

One of the most consequential outcomes of Gulf involvement is the rapid militarization of the HoA and the Red Sea corridor. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have pursued military installations in Eritrea, Somaliland, Puntland, Djibouti, and on Red Sea (Donelli, 2020; Mwangi, 2024). The UAE's strategy, described as *geopolitics of ports*, integrates commercial port management with military operations to secure maritime chokepoints from Aden to Berbera and onward to the Suez Canal. These developments have prompted an arms race in the region, with HoA states increasingly reliant on Gulf-supplied drones, armored vehicles, and surveillance technology. For example, Ethiopia's reported use of drones supplied by the UAE during the Tigray conflict, which demonstrates how Gulf militarization reshapes conflict dynamics in the HoA (Gaid, 2022). Such militarization raises the risk of inter-state conflict, strengthens coercive state apparatuses, and transforms the HoA into a contested security space where external actors drive regional security agendas at the expense of peace.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Gulf conflict intervention in the HoA has generated outcomes that overwhelmingly undermine regional stability. Although Gulf states have occasionally facilitated diplomatic progress, their broader involvement has contributed to prolonging conflicts, weakening local and regional governance structures, increasing regional instability, worsening humanitarian conditions, and accelerating militarization of the HoA. These interventions reflect strategic calculations informed by Gulf regional rivalries rather than the long-term peace and security needs of the HoA. Stability in the HoA requires the strengthening of regional agency. HoA, therefore, must adopt coherent, sovereignty-centered engagement strategies that prioritize institutional resilience, transparency, and accountable governance. Rather than competing for Gulf support, states should coordinate their diplomatic

positions to enhance collective bargaining power. Equally important is the enhancing conflict responsiveness among regional multilateral organizations such as the AU and IGAD. The regional bodies should reclaim leadership in peace processes and insist on structured inclusion in Gulf-backed interventions. On their part, the Gulf states, should endeavour to pursue more transparent, development-oriented and inclusive partnerships that move beyond elite interests and prioritize benefits to the community.

Addressing militarization in the region will require collective security frameworks capable of monitoring arms flows, regulating foreign military bases, and enhancing maritime cooperation. Sustainable development partnerships must replace transactional investment models that deepen vulnerability. Ultimately, long-term peace in the HoA demands a balanced approach that recognizes the strategic interests of Gulf states while upholding the peace and stability of HoA states. Without such changes, Gulf involvement is likely to continue exacerbating rather than resolving the region's complex conflict dynamics.

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