



SOMALIA

IN THE MIDDLE:

MIDDLE POWER MUDDLE IN A FRAGILE STATE

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THE ISSUE

- 'Islamic' Middle Powers wield an increasingly out-sized influence in Somalia. The Horn state has become a theatre for 'hard power' projection by Turkey and Gulf states. Proliferation of uncoordinated, competing bilateral security partnerships have long been a problem in Somalia. Middle Power entry into an already crowded security sector is compounding Somali security disarray and dysfunction.
- A landmark defence pact in 2024 established Turkey's pre-eminence in Somalia. Ankara may capitalise on the deal to achieve its strategic ambition to extend its expeditionary 'blue water' naval capabilities in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. The UAE, which briefly re-engaged in Somalia in 2022 as a key force generation partner, may see Turkey's deal with Somalia as a potential threat to its own commercial maritime interests. If this is the case, we may witness aggressively adversarial competition between Turkey and the UAE that could destabilise Somalia and the wider Horn region.
- Growing middle power influence is having the effect of diminishing Western leverage and could undermine decades of investment in Somalia's 'liberal' state-building project. Constitutional changes made by Hassan Sheikh Mohamud HSM in 2024 centralise power and consolidate factional control mark a political shift towards a 'strong man' model of governance, a process which has been aided by the new regional actors' close proximity diplomacy and peer influence.
- Somalia's political elites at all levels exploit contests between Middle Powers to further their own interests. The already negative manifestations of Somali 'para-diplomacy', which are largely rooted in state fragility and dysfunctional federalism, could be worsened by the advent of zero-sum external competition. Nevertheless, direct parallel diplomacy between Federal Member State (FMS) leaders and Gulf states serves as a counterweight to Mogadishu's aggressive centralisation of state authority and may serve a useful balancing function in the near term.
- Middle power 'transactionalism' in Somalia feeds off a fragile regional multilateral order and the wider global 'crisis of multilateralism.'
- The imperative to contain China and Russia drives Western geo-strategic calculations and trumps concern over the destabilising impact of middle power rivalry and contest in Somalia and the Horn.

INTRODUCTION

Somalia has for decades been a geopolitical theatre in which external competition and rivalries have played out. In recent years, the Horn state has become an arena for rival 'Islamic' middle powers vying for influence and dominance. Long perceived as an essential part of a broader security tapestry for the Gulf States – no doubt owing to its twin proximity to the Gulf region and to the Bab el-Mandeb maritime trade corridor – Somalia's traditional geo-strategic value has lately assumed an even greater importance. Protracted state fragility, weak institutions, fractured politics, social divisions and a pliant elite also make Somalia a comparably low-cost sphere in which to project sway and outbid rivals.

Trade, migration and religion have long been sources of connection between the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. Yet a confluence of emerging factors and dynamics have accelerated the interest levels of the Gulf states and Turkey in Somalia and the wider Horn sub-region. A perceived US retrenchment from the Middle East, escalated apprehensions about Iran's destabilising 'forward defence' strategy, and fears Tehran may inevitably be inching towards becoming a nuclear threshold state – all add to an acute sense of vulnerability in the Gulf. The invasion of Yemen in 2015 by a Saudi–Emirati coalition, for example, reflected the depth of the perceived Iranian threat and their intentions to contain it. This in turn triggered a scramble for military outposts in the Horn of Africa and bilateral security deals.

The expanding role of Turkey and Gulf states in Somalia is now shifting the geo-strategic balance of power and weakening the traditional influence and leverage exercised by Western partners in Somalia. With these states now exerting an oversized influence on Somalia's politics, economy and security, questions about long-term impact have become even more pressing.

This paper, the second instalment in a series on middle and major power competition in the Horn, aims to bring into sharp relief the disruptive influence that Gulf States exert on Somalia's state-building process. It argues that while the humanitarian and developmental contributions made by these states can be beneficial and their commercial investments may be welcome, their preference for unilateralism and tendency to invest in 'agents of influence' and informal networks of power brokers ultimately leads to long-term net harm. These practises catalyse Somali de-institutionalisation and aggravate elite and regional divisions. Gulf 'grey money' is seeding a vast patrimonial system that blurs the line between 'sovereign rent' and bribery. Gulf patrons can now determine Somali electoral outcomes. And the proliferation of uncoordinated bilateral security assistance compounds political dysfunction. Whether by accident or design, these powers exert an authoritarian peer pressure that is rolling back democratic gains and galvanising 'strong man' politics in Somalia. The Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (HSM) administration's ongoing constitutional overhaul to recentralise the state and re-concentrate power in Mogadishu must be understood against this backdrop.

The destabilising potential of middle power competition over Somalia and other fragile conflict-prone Horn states is becoming more widely acknowledged. But regional and international initiatives to manage and mitigate the risks have, so far, produced no coherent plan of action. Armed conflict, political instability, state fragmentation, and weak regional multilateral mechanisms continue to impede effective responses.

Attempts by Somalia's traditional Western allies to inoculate the country from external harm have not been successful. Because such states are deemed partners, they have opted for quiet diplomacy and dialogue, avoided public censure, and seemed willing to expand multilateral mechanisms to accommodate middle power interests; the Quint Partners - a grouping made up

of Turkey, UAE, Qatar, the US and the UK-- is the latest forum established to promote dialogue. Mounting concerns over Chinese and Russian influence have reinforced this approach. Turkey and the Gulf, meanwhile, consciously exploit the impression that their forays into Somalia act as counterbalance to Beijing and Moscow. They now have a seat at the table at most Western-led multilateral forums in which Somalia is discussed, which enables them to give a nod to multilateralism, while simultaneously advancing their own interests and, when expedient, circumventing or defying the West.

It can be argued that the West has not yet ceded its limited state-building and stabilisation role to Muslim middle powers, but its current policy choices nevertheless raise a fundamental question. To what extent is the West's apparent inability to robustly defend its norms, values and commitment to democracy driven by the exigencies of a grand *real politik* bargain - outsourcing containment of China and Russia to Turkey and Gulf states?

'ISLAMIC' MIDDLE POWERS: WHAT DRIVES THEM?

Turkey and the Gulf states are categorised as 'middle powers,' an "imprecise and contested" term, conventionally employed to refer to states that are able to exert significant influence in global politics by dint of their economic or military clout.¹ It is also an elastic term applied to states with diplomatic and military clout in their respective geographic regions. In eastern Africa, Egypt, Kenya and Ethiopia are generally regarded either as prospective or actual 'middle powers.' Early academic writing on geopolitics defined middle powers as states more inclined to rule-based multilateralism, with a vested interest in a 'multilateral pivot.'² In a multi-polar world in which power is increasingly dispersed, they have a strong incentive to influence the global order and reconfigure the rules of the game in their favour. The traditional definition of middle powers is now contested and revised due to a recent surge in middle power transactionalism, propelled by Turkey and the Gulf states, among others.

Bilateralism and multilateralism

Gulf states prefer aid and diplomatic bilateralism over multilateralism.³ This is a long-established tradition that is unlikely to change any time soon. But this entrenched practice does not preclude their engagement in specific forms of multilateral cooperation from which they stand to derive gain.

Turkey and Gulf state attitudes to multilateralism could be characterized as predominantly transactionalist. In this sense, these governments are not so much averse to as selective about multilateralism – choosing the multilateral engagements that best serve their interests, while avoiding those that generate obligations to adhere to unwelcome international norms. A perennial concern of the conservative Gulf monarchies is the imposition of Western 'cultural universalism' and related values; this partly explains their generalised suspicion of multilateralism. They remain resistant, for example, to UN attempts to bring their labour, immigration and civic legislation into accordance with international standards.⁴

¹ World Economic Forum, "Middle powers: what are they and why do they matter?" January 2024.

² Thomas Wright, *Middle powers and the multilateral pivot*, 2015.

³ For example, foreign aid disbursements by the big four Gulf donors-- Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait and Qatar-- are overwhelmingly bilateral, between 64 and 100% of their totals. Moosa Elayah, Hassan al-Awami, *Exploring the preference for bilateral aid: Gulf oil states' aid to Yemen*, March 2024.

⁴ Khalifa A. Alfadhel, *The GCC Human Rights Declaration: An Instrumentation of Cultural Relativism*, Arab Law Quarterly, 31 (1) 89-98, February 2017.

But Turkey, Qatar, the UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia all have an interest in supporting high-profile multilateral regional and international peace diplomacy and crave the diplomatic prestige that comes with being viewed as ‘responsible actors.’ For example, in July 2022, Turkey joined the UN and Russia in negotiating the Black Sea grain initiative that allowed Ukraine to export grains to international markets.⁵ Although this multilateral initiative collapsed one year later, Ankara’s role was widely praised at the time. In September 2023, Saudi Arabia, in conjunction with the United States, launched a joint mediation initiative to broker a ceasefire and a political settlement in Sudan.⁶ Qatar and Egypt, meanwhile, remain engaged in the complex multilateral negotiations to bring about a ceasefire in Gaza and secure the release of the remaining Israeli hostages held by Hamas. And the UAE, increasingly interested in climate change diplomacy, hosted global climate talks in November 2023.

Informal networks, diplomacy and ‘the politics of intimacy’

Gulf states are led by traditional hereditary monarchies, with executive power fully vested in ruling families. Most are highly centralised states, with the UAE, a loose federation of autonomous emirates, the notable exception. The Gulf states have parliaments and ‘modern’ constitutions that offer limited representation, plebiscites, and civil rights and freedoms to their citizens. To govern effectively, the ruling families rely on control of ministries and state bureaucracies, as well as informal social networks. By investing sovereign state rents in establishing patronage systems and informal (often familial) social networks, rulers are able to achieve quick results, mobilise wide support and defuse social discontent. Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdogan has similarly evolved into a Gulf-style neo-patrimonial state.⁷

In the realm of foreign policy, these states deploy a hybrid style of diplomacy designed to form long-term relationships that are not confined to states and their formal structures of executive power but also extend to individuals and non-state ‘centres of influence.’ Formal bilateral aid, often unreported, is complemented by resources provided to individual clients. From a Gulf perspective, the benefits outweigh the risks, allowing them to develop long-term, often intimate relations with foreign ‘agents of influence,’ based on trust and mutual interest, achieving quick dividends and guaranteeing continuity. The Gulf’s decidedly informal and hybrid style of external engagement feeds off the Horn’s legacy of an often-personalised governance style and deep patronage systems. Horn political elites prefer the informal, opaque, non-prescriptive and transactional partnerships offered by Gulf states and Turkey to the type of conditional partnership generally offered by the West.

When systems of informal politics and ‘cultures of intimacy’ converge they produce beneficial outcomes for both sets of actors, encouraging de-institutionalisation and corruption.

Related, Western states’ traditional engagement in the Horn, framed on notions of ‘liberal’ institution-building and democratisation, contrasts with the Gulf model of stabilisation. Yet Gulf states prefer to be seen as responsible, not predatory, agents of change. Arguably for them the practice of investing in informal patronage systems and transactionalism could also indicate a projection (often mistaken) of their own experience that empowering local elites is an effective way of helping to build and consolidate state control.

⁵ Al-Jazeera, *Russia-Ukraine Black Sea grain deal: All you need to know*, July 2023.

⁶ Imad K. Harb, *One Year On: The Calamities of the Sudan Conflict*, Arab Centre, Washington DC, March 2024.

⁷ Ole Frahm, Katharina Hoffmann, *Dual agent of transition: how Turkey perpetuates and challenges neo-patrimonial patterns in its post-Soviet neighbourhood*, *Journal of East European Politics*, Issue 1, Vol. 37, 2021.

Aid and bailouts

Gulf states match their geopolitical ambitions with extraordinary outlays of foreign aid and investment, to a level which is beginning to outpace aid by traditional bilateral and multilateral partners. Between 1963 and 2022, the Gulf states disbursed an estimated USD 363 billion to 22 countries in the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and beyond, in the form of grants and bailouts.⁸ A key strategic aim of such aid is to stabilise regional economies as a means to pre-empt an economic collapse that could trigger wider social unrest and demands for revolutionary change – although it certainly also buys political influence.

‘Islamic’ middle power aid and investment in the Horn of Africa fits this broader pattern and has been steadily on the rise. The UAE has stepped in multiple times to shore up Ethiopia’s ailing economy since 2018. Emirati investment in Ethiopia in chemicals, foods and beverages, and aluminium and pharmaceuticals exceeded USD 2.9 billion in 2022. Turkey is a commercial competitor in Ethiopia; in 2024 its investments are estimated at over USD 2 billion. And in 2017, the UAE, through DP World, pledged to invest USD 336 million to expand the port of Bosaso in the Puntland Region of Somalia; a year later it won a similar concession to expand and manage the port of Berbera in Somaliland at a cost of USD 440 million.⁹

The huge flow of middle power resources into Somalia and the Horn, while at times beneficial, also poses serious challenges, not least of which being the limited capacity of regional states to effectively absorb these resources and put them to good use. The opaque manner of aid disbursement also creates loopholes for corruption and exacerbates elite state capture and disruptive forms of competition.

Grand Strategy

As a rule, emerging states attempting to claw their way up the global pecking order, and those desirous of projecting influence, need a strategy.¹⁰ Many invest in crafting grand strategies designed to anchor policy, and align their internal and external priorities and interests. Some publish these and conduct routine reviews. Even when a grand strategy does not exist in a written form, a grand strategic calculus can be inferred from conduct, actions and rhetoric.

Familiarity with the grand strategies of Gulf states and Turkey is, therefore, necessary to understand their goals and means of projecting power in the Horn. Kenya and Ethiopia, two Horn states with assertive foreign powers, deemed ‘anchor states,’ have in recent years developed grand strategies of their own. Both view Somalia as vital to their own national security and are therefore keen not to cede leverage to new Gulf actors and Turkey. Comparative analysis of these regional grand strategies is also helpful to assess the potential for collisions and collaboration.

Somalia in the wider Horn has become a crucible in which multiple grand strategies intersect, converge and collide. The following inform notable axes of grand strategies in the region:

⁸ Hassan al-Hassan, Camille Lons, *Gulf Bailout Diplomacy: Aid as Economic Statecraft in a Turbulent Region*, IISS, October 2023.

⁹ Fabio Van Loon, *Middle-Power Aid Rivalry in the Horn of Africa: A Comparative Study of Emirati and Turkish Foreign Aid Policy in Somalia*, *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, June 2022.

¹⁰ One caveat: this general rule does not preclude the influence of elite whim, caprice and self-interest in shaping how states behave abroad.

- (a) **Stability:** Almost all grand strategies of Turkey, Gulf states and Horn states consider stability in existential terms, as an imperative for national survival. A stable homeland is reliant on a stable periphery.
- (b) **Islamic Geoculture:** Culture connects the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn and mediates today's geopolitical dynamics in complex and significant ways. The Horn sub-region is home to one of the largest Muslim populations in Africa; 99% of Somalia's 12 million people are Muslims, with Ethiopia at 31.3% of 113 million, and Eritrea at 37% to 49% of its population.¹¹ Arabic is a working language in Somalia, Djibouti and Eritrea, while Swahili, spoken by an estimated 200 million people in Eastern and Central Africa, is heavily influenced by Arabic. Somalia and Djibouti are full members of the League of Arab States and the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). Eritrea, conferred with a special 'non-member' status, sits at Arab League meetings.

Religious, linguistic and cultural connections serve as important points of reference in the interaction between the Horn and the Islamic middle powers. These linkages form a 'structure of empathy and solidarity' used to justify humanitarian and developmental interventions and mobilise global solidarity and concerted political action in times of crises. A potent cultural asset, Islam provides the Gulf and Turkey with competitive advantage in negotiating access; the Horn's Muslim populations, especially in Somalia, view their engagements as 'culturally sensitive,' benign and acceptable. Al-Shabaab is a significant outlier; the extremist group has in recent years escalated its invective against Turkey and the UAE, referring to them as 'apostate states.'

Faith can be unifying but also potentially hazardous, especially, when used as a foreign policy tool. Untangling the risks and the distinct variations in how each Islamic middle power leverages religion is, therefore, helpful. For example, Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran are still fierce rivals for global Islamic leadership, even though in recent years both have stepped back from their sectarian agendas and active proselytising, prioritising Pan-Islamic solidarity and ecumenicalism instead. Egypt prides itself as the custodian of moderate Sunni Islam, and Al-Azhar University is the seat of orthodox scholasticism. Turkey's Erdogan likes to cast himself as an Islamist 'moderniser,' a champion of world Muslims who supports 'moderate' Islamist movements. Qatar tends to be more closely aligned with hard-line Islamist groups, while the UAE, averse to Islamists of all hues, regards regional containment of militant Islamism as a high priority.

- (c) **Externalisation:** Emanating from the general principle of stability, maintenance of internal and regional stability is a topmost priority. National security doctrines, as conceived, demand the exercise of effective control over an inner domestic core (the homeland) and an outer core-- of 'neighbourly ties,' 'friendly forces' and 'buffer zones'. States must have the will and capacity to exercise military preclusion to ward off threats along their peripheries, both unilaterally and cooperatively, by deploying troops along and at times beyond their borders. Iran's 'forward defence' and Saudi-UAE military interventionism in Yemen, Libya and Sudan, as well as Turkey's interventions in Libya and the Caucasus are emblematic of the externalised stabilisation imperative that so often drives the geopolitics of middle powers. The Gulf's ongoing militarised diplomacy in the Horn can also be understood as a geographic extension of military preclusion or 'forward defence' of a periphery long regarded as the Gulf's 'western^[1] security flank.'

¹¹ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Factsheet religious freedom in the Horn of Africa*, Feb 2023

- (d) **Autonomy and diversification:** Middle powers desire to reduce states' dependence on the West, and exercise a high degree of agency in pursuit of their national interests and overall foreign policy. The aspiration to achieve 'strategic autonomy' is common to most rising powers. Turkey is a skillful practitioner of strategic autonomy, demonstrating the ability to maintain traditional alliances and diversify its foreign policy. This has often meant a delicate balancing act, the capacity to calibrate compliance and defiance, without fatally harming ties with its principal Western allies – the European Union and the US. Gulf states' strategic autonomy is evolving along a similar trajectory, characterised by an interest in reducing dependence on the West while developing ties with Russia, China and the Global South. The decisions by Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE and Egypt to join BRICS reflects this ambition.^[4] Ethiopia is currently the only Horn state that belongs to BRICS.
- (e) **Geo-economics, economic security and modernisation:** Economic diplomacy is a key element of all regional grand strategies. The quest to expand trade and investment and compete for external advantage is most commonly associated with states with surplus wealth or those that have large market-driven economies. Gulf states and Turkey view the Horn as an important resource frontier with untapped markets crucial to advancing their own trade and economic diversification, and satisfying their food security needs. The UAE and Turkey, two nations with strong regional economic ambitions, tussle for dominance. This has driven the frenetic pace of port acquisitions, expanding stakes in diverse and lucrative economic sectors.

A VOLATILE MIDDLE EAST: RELATIONS, ALLIANCES

The emerging Middle Eastern middle powers now vying for influence in Somalia and the wider Horn of Africa are not monolithic; significant differences can be discerned in economic size, military capabilities, and diplomatic experience and clout. Collectively, they constitute the wealthiest club of emerging regional powers, well-positioned to influence global politics in the coming decades. They represent diverse political traditions and values, and a range of economic systems. Turkey is a constitutional democracy with a dynamic export-led economy and strong secular traditions, notwithstanding its current economic malaise and lurch towards nationalist populism and Islamism. Gulf states, though still highly repressive and conservative constitutional monarchies, are now embarked on ambitious projects of modernisation. Understanding these structural differences, the evolving global and regional geopolitical contexts, and the dynamic nature of inter-state relations and alliances are all necessary.

Intra-Gulf relations and Turkey-Gulf relations have for decades been unpredictable, characterised by peaks and troughs, and prone to periodic tensions and adversarial alliance-formation. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has over the years become more invested in 'salvage diplomacy,' countering political divisions that have escalated to point of rupture and armed confrontation, than in proactive diplomacy to address the root causes of recurrent conflicts and tensions.

In 2017, the sharp polarisation that saw long-fester tensions tip into open rifts, pitting Qatar against the majority of its neighbours, formalised a rift that had already existed between the Saudi-Emirati and Turkey-Qatar axes. Later a deal made in January 2021 in the Saudi city of Alula led to reconciliation with Qatar and ended some of the regional rifts, allowing a shaky détente to emerge along with dialogue and cooperation. Gulf ties with both Turkey and Iran steadily improved as a result. In a still later example, tensions between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, rooted in a grinding stalemate in Yemen, eased in May 2024, after a high-profile meeting between Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS) and Muhammad Bin Zayed. But the ongoing Gaza conflict since

late 2023 is now bringing Sunni powers together, while setting the clock back on relations with Shia Iran. The trajectory of the region may now rest on the outcome of armed conflict in Gaza, as the risks of political escalation and wider conflagration remain high. These will almost certainly impact the Horn.

THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES: 'BELT AND PORTS' STRATEGY

The UAE is a federation of seven emirates and absolute monarchies governed by one ruler who presides over the Federal Supreme Council. Modernising, outward-looking, with a vibrant and diversified service economy built on its geography as a major trans-shipment hub, the UAE is perhaps the most assertive of the emerging Gulf actors. Its overriding interest is to position itself as the dominant commercial actor in the Horn, in part by using its ports logistics firm, DP World. Its modernisation agenda is driven by an ambition to expand its expeditionary military capabilities and close the technological and scientific gap with its regional competitors. But increased international criticism of its military interventionism, in particular the 'surrogate warfare' it is sponsoring in Sudan, is encouraging some of Abu Dhabi's more cautious advisors to assert greater control over UAE foreign policy in the Horn.¹²

Jabal Ali trade corridor

Abu Dhabi's principal geo-strategic interest is in establishing economic and political control over the Western Indian Ocean. Jabal Ali – the UAE's main commercial port - links a maritime trade route stretching from South Asia to the Horn and North Africa. The success and health of Jabal Ali is reliant on the relative stability of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, and the expansion of ports controlled by DP World linked to hinterland economies. Somali port acquisitions are therefore integral to the long term objective of forging a seamless chain of Emirati 'Belt and Ports.'

The term 'Riyal Politik' was coined to describe Abu Dhabi's political-economic agenda, particularly in its regional backyard. The giant conglomerate DP World is a crucial component of this policy, establishing significant ports in Doraleh in Djibouti, Bosasso in Puntland, and Berbera in Somaliland. By strategically locating its facilities in the Horn, DP World ensures that the UAE is perhaps the most dominant actor in relation to Somalia's imports.

Of these ports, Berbera in Somaliland is the most significant— politically and economically. For one, the investment signalled that Abu Dhabi was happy to circumvent Mogadishu and Somalia's 'sovereignty' in pursuing its own interests. Berbera has remained a major investment, with an initial USD 442 million promised by DP World and Somaliland to renovate and expand the port. Initially, the majority stake was to go to DP World, while Somalia and Ethiopia would assume 30% and 19% stakes, respectively. Ethiopia never followed through, however, for various reasons, including the short-lived Abiy-Farmaajo courtship. In just 5 years, port container capacity has grown from 150,000 20-foot equivalent units to 500,000. It is not coincidental that immediately following the signing of the Berbera port investment agreement, Hargeisa also granted the UAE the rights to build a military base on its territory.

Further, the UAE is likely to continue pursuing its interests in Puntland and cementing its alliances with FMS Presidents Deni and Madoobe. Even for Villa Somalia, which tends to look to Doha for patronage, it is not wise to upset Abu Dhabi. The UAE still wields immense influence in both Puntland and Jubaland, as well as among some of Mogadishu's political elite; it could make life unpleasant for the federal government if it so desired. The UAE's withdrawal of

¹² Sahan Research interview with Gulf analysts, May 2024.

stipend support for over 10,000 SNA troops in early 2024 has already dealt a sharp blow to Somalia's fragile military.

Security and political stakes

The UAE has historically been more interested in exerting influence in Somaliland and Puntland than in meddling with Mogadishu's torrid politics.¹³ Its current securitised engagement in Somalia is being driven by multiple goals – countering Qatar and its allied Somali Islamist organisations, outbidding Turkey, and maintaining influence with federal authorities in Mogadishu to secure its stakes in Somaliland and Ethiopia. Its patronage system and parallel diplomacy with regional administrations and regional elites counterbalances Mogadishu. Largely through the provision of political support and opaque cash deliveries, the UAE commands significant influence in Jubaland and Puntland, and maintains ties with other FMS leaders.

Since the early 2010s, UAE security investments and other interests in Somalia have ebbed and flowed. In pursuit of its Red Sea agenda, Abu Dhabi established close ties with the leadership of Puntland and Jubaland. Its support has included training for SNA special forces and salaries for the Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF). Its investment in the PMPF began in 2011, at the height of Somalia's piracy epidemic when the UAE sought to establish a quasi-independent security force to quell piracy on and offshore. Its mandate was later extended to tackling the flow of weapons from Iran and Yemen to Somalia. Even when the UAE halted the majority of its security support for Somalia in 2018, it continued to fund the PMPF. The regional force has since faced criticism, including in relation to a number of incidents in the run-up to the January 2024 Puntland presidential election. The successful candidate, incumbent Sa'id Deni, was accused of using displays of force by the PMPF to intimidate his opponents in Garowe in November and December 2023. But at other points, Abu Dhabi had acted as a restraining influence on the force, including during clashes between Somaliland and Puntland in 2018.

In 2014, Abu Dhabi and Mogadishu penned a significant security deal for the former to provide training to SNA forces. This involved the construction and development of the General Gordon military base in Mogadishu– the target of a February 2024 Al-Shabaab infiltrator shooting that left four (4) Emirati military officers dead.¹⁴ The base had served as the location at which the UAE vetted SNA candidates and established units before their departure to Uganda and other countries for training. Between 3,500-4,500 SNA forces have received military training in Uganda, paid for by the UAE. Abu Dhabi has sought to create multi-clan units to guard against the politicisation and corrosive dynamics with which other SNA units have struggled.

In 2017, Somalia's regional states opposed Mogadishu's support for Qatar and backed a Saudi-led coalition. But in April 2018, at the instigation of Qatar, Somalia severed ties with the UAE, and seized some USD 10 million from an Emirati plane in Mogadishu. The UAE protested that the cash was intended as stipend support for the SNA.

The UAE has funded the training of up to 8 brigades, a total of 14,400 soldiers, each of whom receives USD 256 per month. While paid on time and on a regular basis, it has been widely reported that the soldiers are to be paid with funds channelled through Defence Minister Nur's personal bank account. This is typical of the ad hoc, opaque way in which the Gulf states operate in Somalia and the wider Horn. The UAE has also provided military vehicles and training to Jubaland regional forces. These forces, largely consisting of former Ras Kamboni

¹³ Interview with Gulf analyst, May 2024.

¹⁴ Sahan Research archive material

fighters, are much like the PMPF, serving at the discretion of the influential and long-serving regional President Ahmed Mohamed Madoobe, who maintains personal ties with Abu Dhabi.

The re-election of President Hassan Sheikh for a second non-consecutive term in 2022 helped restore the security relationship between the UAE and Somalia. Abu Dhabi and Mogadishu signed a defence pact in May 2023, and the UAE resumed financial support for the SNA. The UAE has also undertaken limited drone strikes on behalf of Somalia, the first in June 2023 in Galgaduud. Rapprochement is limited, however, as UAE officials are frustrated with the federal parliament's failure to pass the 2023 defence pact; they also harbour suspicions that the reason for the delays in doing so are due to Mogadishu's pivot towards Qatar and Turkey.

SAUDI ARABIA: SOFT POWER AND ISLAM

Saudi Arabia remains the most influential and wealthiest Gulf power, with an increasingly assertive foreign policy stewarded by Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman. Saudi foreign policy has undergone several significant changes in recent years. Its grand strategy is to maintain the kingdom as leader of the global Muslim *ummah*, contain Iran and the spread of militant Sunni and Shia Islamism, and expand its global diplomatic influence. Its commercial policy in the Horn is focused on investment in food security projects – typically commercial agriculture and related supply chains in Sudan and Ethiopia.

Until recently, and for over a decade, Riyadh served as the backbone of an alliance that sought to isolate Iran and Qatar. In both cases, Saudi Arabia sought to enlist the public support of Mogadishu, among other countries, to increase pressure on its then-adversaries. In the first case, Mogadishu was happy to oblige; it severed ties with Iran in 2016. In the second case, however, Riyadh's offer of USD 80 million in 2017 proved insufficient to pry the Farmaajo administration away from its patrons in Doha. Saudi Arabia subsequently suspended financial assistance to Somalia, temporarily, though it did not seek to undermine Mogadishu politically.

Saudi Arabia, in comparison to the UAE and Qatar, has not typically pursued a close political relationship with Somalia. Riyadh only appointed an ambassador to Somalia in 2021– the first in three decades. Still, in recent months, Saudi Arabia and Somalia have become closer, signing security cooperation agreements in November 2023 and April 2024, though the precise nature of these agreements remains unclear.

Saudi Arabia's real influence in Somalia has been exercised through the spread of Wahhabism, from the 1970s and particularly from the 1990s onwards. The Islamisation of the Somali state and society can be largely ascribed to the ideological influence of Saudi sheikhs, and investments of Qatari, Kuwaiti, and Saudi charities from the mid-2000s.¹⁵ With the emergence of the Islamic Courts Union in Mogadishu in the 2000s, a degree of stability returned to the capital and its environs, and Saudi Arabia stepped up its support through non-governmental organisations. Largely Saudi-funded, Islamic organisations and charities ploughed money into schools that used Arabic as their primary language of instruction, paid teachers, and provided free lunches. Wahhabism steadily grew in influence throughout local communities in South Central Somalia, precipitating a wane in Sufism. Funding was also provided through charitable services for Sharia courts.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia also fostered the gestation of two seminal Islamist groups that greatly influenced Somalia's trajectory in 1978 – Al Islah and Al Itihad Al Islami (AIAI). AIAI later

¹⁵ Sahan archival material.

became Somalia's dominant Salafist group and can be seen as a precursor to Al-Shabaab. These transnational and clandestine Islamist movements opposed the 'scientific socialism' of Siyad Barre's regime and his social reform efforts of the 1970s. And Al-I'tisaam has strong theological links to Saudi sheikhs, particularly the former grand mufti Abdul Aziz ibn Abdullah ibn Baz. It is a far less socially 'moderate' Islamist movement than some of its political rivals, with its leadership ambivalent about Al-Shabaab, sceptical of constitutional democracy, and opposed to various women's rights.

Still, there can be a tendency to ascribe to an excessive degree the emergence of jihadism and extremism in the Horn, and across Africa, to the spread of Wahhabism by Saudi imams, charities, and development. This belies a more complex truth in fragile or collapsed states in Somalia and Mali— that their narratives held particular appeal in these vulnerable contexts.

In regard to economic ties, Saudi Arabia has intermittently banned and re-opened livestock exports from Somalia, citing health concerns. An estimated 5.4 million animals are exported from Somalia to Saudi Arabia for Hajj every year. Somalia also exports some USD 250 million worth of camels every year, mainly to Saudi Arabia, but also to the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Egypt and Kuwait.

QATAR: BROKERAGE DIPLOMACY

Qatar is an increasingly influential soft power and diplomatic actor in the Gulf. It has in recent years carved a niche for itself as the region's go-to mediator, leveraging its close contacts and policy of providing material and political support as well as asylum to militant groups. A practitioner of independent para-diplomacy based on fostering intimacy and trust with groups traditionally shunned as terrorists, its brand of conflict mediation has appeal and utility for powerful regional and international actors. Qatar hosted talks between the US and the Taliban between 2013 and 2020, which facilitated the US exit from Afghanistan, and in late 2024 began a diplomatic initiative to mediate between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza conflict.

Qatar's policy on Somalia is more intrusive. The Gulf state cultivates soft power and grooms political allies through funding, Qatar Charity, and media influencing through outlets like Al Jazeera. Qatari sponsorship of political candidates has been seen to decisively swing Somali elections. In fact, Somalia has become the primary route through which Doha seeks to wield its influence in the Horn.

Somalia and Qatar have enjoyed cordial relations since their mutual recognition as sovereign states in 1974. Today, the second-largest embassy in Mogadishu belongs to Qatar; only Turkey's is larger. The symbolism of this should not be ignored, nor the dozens of cooperative agreements that have been signed between Qatar and successive Somali governments over the past decade, ranging from donations for flood victims, and funding for education and library books, to the delivery of 68 armoured personnel carriers (APCs) in January 2019.¹⁶

Many of the agreements between Qatar and Somalia have been deliberately framed in ambiguous terms and may not even come to fruition. When they do transpire, implementation is often directed through Turkish allies, such as the infamous USD 200 million asphalt highway slated to be built between Mogadishu and Afgooye. It was announced just a few months after Farmaajo quietly offered Somalia's support to Qatar during its four-year blockade (2017-2021) by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt. The development of the Port of Hobyo in

¹⁶ Reuters, Qatar gives Somalia armoured vehicles, January 2019

Galmudug, undertaken by Qatar in 2019 then continued by Turkey, has likewise dragged on with few tangible results.

One of the key avenues through which Qatar pursues its agenda in Somalia is using untraceable cash handed to its favoured politicians. Such transactions are deliberately hard to monitor—especially given that a suitcase of cash can alter an election in Somalia, as in 2017. Whether such a venture succeeds or fails, the amounts invested are considered trifling for such a wealthy country, and its opaqueness insulates Doha from any political fallout.

While officially neutral, the Farmaajo government was, in practice, a client of Qatar. Following Farmaajo's election in 2017, reports circulated that Doha had financially backed his run for president (in fact, both the 2017 and 2022 Somali presidential elections were notoriously corrupt, and Qatar was not alone in plunging money into vote-buying efforts; the UAE was also implicated). Somalia's alignment with Qatar was poorly received by the Saudi-led coalition, which had expected Mogadishu's support against Iran, as in 2016. The UAE in particular exerted significant pressure on Farmaajo's government to sever ties with Turkey and Qatar.

During the Farmaajo administration, Fahad Yasin served as Qatar's principal 'Man in Mogadishu,' acting as the go-between for Doha and Mogadishu, and as the principal dispenser and broker of Qatari financial largesse. A former fighter with the Al-Qa'eda affiliate, Al-Itihaad Al-Islami (AIAI), he had previously served as Al Jazeera's chief correspondent in Somalia, during which time Al Jazeera boasted extraordinary access to Al-Shabaab leaders and other militants. Following his appointment as Farmaajo's Chief of Staff, Fahad initiated negotiations with AIAI's successor, Al-I'tisaam, which – with Doha's support - he cultivated as a political power base. Most concerning for the erosion of Somali sovereignty was the incremental takeover of key decision-making sites by Qatar under the Farmaajo government, including its extravagant investment in NISA when Fahad took the helm of the agency. In essence, Qatar controlled Somalia's 'deep state'.¹⁷

Political meddling, ties to Islamists

Qatar has adopted the dubious mantle of developing and supporting militant Salafist groups from Saudi Arabia as well as the Muslim Brotherhood. It enjoys close ties with a number of Islamist groups across the Horn and Europe, funding imams and Islamic charities that espouse Doha's Salafist vision. The Gulf state may not be actively proselytising as the Saudis did in the 1970s in the Horn, but it is grooming and supporting Islamist leaders. In fact, Qatar seems intent on establishing a string of Islamist, pro-Doha administrations across the Horn and the Gulf.

Qatar's links to Al-Shabaab are far murkier and more contentious. In the mid-2000s, Doha supplied the extremist group with money and weapons, using Eritrea as its main conduit.¹⁸ Some, including in the UAE, who are deeply suspicious of political Islamism and Qatar in particular, maintain that Doha is still Al-Shabaab's primary external patron. Abu Dhabi released a tape several years ago which it purported to be a telephone conversation between Qatari officials discussing an active terror plot in Puntland. Moreover, Qatar Charity operates in Al-Shabaab-controlled areas of Somalia, untainted by the veil of suspicion through which the jihadists view other foreign aid agencies. And during Farmaajo's administration, Qatar ran its security policy on Somalia through Fahad Yasin, the Director General of NISA. Former Al-Shabaab were appointed to senior positions in the security agency, and military operations against Al-Shabaab effectively ground to a halt. Indeed, the most significant offensive of Farmaajo's administration

¹⁷ Sahan Research archive.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

was conducted against one of Al-Shabaab's main adversaries: the Sufi Islamic militia Ahlu Sunna wal Jama'a.

Nor has Qatar abandoned its aspiration of legitimising Al-Shabaab and bringing it into a putative unity government through political negotiations. In styling itself as a 'peace mediator,' Doha has positioned itself between militant Islamic groups and governments, most notably working to return the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 2021. It is likely seeking to replicate this formula in Somalia, and there is a real possibility that the federal government, facing growing security and political crises, may feel it is not in a position to resist.

Following the loss of political influence when Hassan Sheikh came to power through the presidential election of 2022, Doha retreated from Mogadishu politics, even as it retained its relationship with Fahad Yasin and continued to promote dialogue with Al-Shabaab. But more recently there have been signs that Mogadishu is once again keen to court Qatar. In early November 2023, Villa Somalia appointed then-Minister of Internal Security Doodishe, a senior Damul Jadiid, as Ambassador to Qatar.¹⁹ And other senior federal officials have subsequently travelled to Doha with increasing frequency— particularly since the announcement of the Somaliland-Ethiopia MoU, for which Mogadishu believes the UAE was responsible.

In September 2023, Somalia's Prime Minister Hamza Abdi Barre called on Qatari businesses to invest in Somalia, describing the Gulf state as one of Somalia's most important trade partners. Mogadishu is courting investment in the country's energy sector and infrastructure, while Qatar is already assisting in the construction of the Federal Ministry of Planning and Investment in the capital.

A post-jihadi state

The renewed blossoming of relations between Mogadishu and Doha makes the possibility of a Qatari-negotiated 'peace deal' with Al-Shabaab more likely. A post-jihadi state and government of cohabitation had been a priority for Qatar during the Farmaajo administration but faltered at the beginning of Hassan Sheikh's second term, as he was widely perceived as a more moderate leader than his predecessor. But the recent creeping Islamisation of the current federal government, as evidenced by recent constitutional amendments employing the language of Sharia law, has caused many to revise this assessment. Continual military setbacks and the planned exit of foreign forces under ATMIS could also serve as catalysts for the emergence of a post-jihadi political settlement.

Qatar's ultimate objectives in Somalia can be hard to divine, yet its present ability to influence events through transactional diplomacy at relatively little cost or risk of negative consequences is unparalleled in Somalia. But even as Qatar seeks to elevate the roles of extremist groups, it also values its ties with the US and UK, among other strong Western partners. This pragmatic stance has allowed Qatar to flexibly pursue its geopolitical interests; it could also allow its Western partners some degree of influence over Doha's Somali policy.

TURKEY: STATUS QUO DIPLOMACY

Turkish involvement in Somalia began anew in 2011, when, in response to famine ravaging Somalia, Turkish humanitarian organisations, including the Turkish Red Crescent and Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), provided essential humanitarian relief. In fact, it was Turkey that took the lead in raising global awareness about Somalia's humanitarian crisis,

¹⁹ Damul Jadid is a Somali Islamist faction that is an off-shoot of the Muslim Brotherhood and forms the core support base of the current president.

through diplomatic and media channels. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan travelled with his wife to Mogadishu at the peak of the famine in 2011, the first leader outside of Africa to visit Somalia in nearly 20 years. And Ankara re-opened its embassy, now Turkey's largest in the world. But this was not a simple case of goodwill; it represented an important investment opportunity for Turkey, and a chance to re-engage with a former Ottoman outpost.

The Somali government and its public enthusiastically received Turkey's humanitarian support. And during Hassan Sheikh's first term from 2012-2017, he oversaw the rapid deepening of ties between the two governments. Turkey's ruling AK Party and Somalia's Damul Jadiid shared a kindred ideology centred on moderate Islamism and development-minded policies. Interestingly, Turkey's engagement in Somalia has been described as part of the AK Party's 'Neo-Ottoman' foreign policy, which sees Turkey engaging with Muslim countries. Yet this has also heralded a more complicated relationship with Western countries. In the past, Erdogan implicitly criticised Western relationships with Somalia, contrasting a 'Western approach' with that of Turkey, a "true friend" that "respects their history, culture, traditions, languages."

Turkey's relationship with Somalia has also been informed by its competition with the UAE. Relations between the two countries plummeted in the 2010s over contrasting stands on a number of developments, including the Arab Spring, the 2013 coup in Egypt, armed conflicts in Libya and Syria, and the Turkish-Qatari alliance during the first Gulf War. Growing Turkish investments and economic influence in Mogadishu was a source of frustration for Abu Dhabi, most notably in September 2013 when a Turkish company, Favori LLC, assumed the lucrative responsibility for Mogadishu's Aden Adde International Airport from Dubai-based SKA Air and Logistics, and in 2015 when the Turkish Albayrak Group took over the Mogadishu Port.

Soft power

To Villa Somalia, Turkey is Somalia's most dependable ally. It is transactional, cautious, focused on continuity, and generally invested in maintaining the status quo. All of this lends stability to bilateral relations and inoculates them from abrupt foreign policy shifts.

Both Somalia's public and its politicians are overwhelmingly positive about Turkey. Somali children have been named after Erdogan. Following the devastating earthquake in Turkey and Syria in 2023, the second deputy speaker of Somalia's Lower House of Parliament suggested that lawmakers donate 20% of their salaries to the victims of the earthquake in Turkey. Many of Somalia's business and political elites travel to Turkey on holiday or live there in retirement. Ankara has a growing Somali business community. Turkish humanitarian assistance through TIKA continues to enjoy positive media coverage in Somalia during humanitarian crises. Even as the quantity of this assistance falls, such coverage still translates into immense soft power for Turkey.

In early 2024, amidst the diplomatic fall-out from the Somaliland-Ethiopia Memorandum of Understanding-- which offered a lease of 20 km of land on the Bab el-Mandeb Strait in exchange for sovereign recognition of the polity-- Turkey and Somalia signed a maritime security pact. While the details of this remain elusive, Somalia has apparently offered Turkey significant access to its maritime resources in exchange for the development of Somalia's now non-existent navy. Reconstituting a navy is surely a years-long process, but the agreement nonetheless signalled a strong vote of confidence in Turkey as Somalia's ally and represented a shot across the bow to Ethiopia and the UAE. Qatar also reportedly played some role in the Turkey-Somalia deal. In any case, Ankara, Cairo, Riyadh and Doha have all taken the opportunity in 2024 to reassert their support for Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

While no country openly recognises Somaliland as a sovereign independent state, Ethiopia and the UAE are two of its closest allies. Turkey, on the other hand, is firmly committed to a 'One Somalia' policy, despite having hosted a Somalia-Somaliland dialogue between 2013 and 2018. The talks subsequently faltered, with Farmaajo reneging on agreements made in Turkey, and in 2018, the Federal Government of Somalia abrogated a related agreement with Somaliland to allow direct international aid to be delivered directly to Somaliland instead of through Mogadishu.

In the 13 years since Turkey re-established relations with Somalia it has profited immensely from its relationship with the Horn nation as its premier ally and trading partner. Turkish goods are ever-more present in Mogadishu, squeezing out mass-produced Chinese goods and Middle Eastern counterparts. Clothes, food and footwear are all considered better quality, and Somalis are happy to pay more for them. Furniture stores such as Enza Home are now staples for the middle and upper classes. And Turkish education is considered very attractive, with scholarships to Somali students, and 30-day e-Visas available to Somalis, all soft power gestures.

Security stakes

Since the mid-2010s, Turkey has also become an important military partner to Somalia—primarily through its training of Gorgor (Eagle) special forces at the TURKSOM base in Mogadishu. Construction of the base, Turkey's largest overseas, spanning some 400 hectares, began in 2015 and is reported to have cost some USD 50 million. By June 2023, Turkish military officials had trained 9 Gorgor infantry battalions—nearly 5,000 soldiers, with training of the 10th and 11th battalions currently ongoing. These units have also been kitted with Turkish-made arms, including MPT-76 rifles.

TURKSOM-trained forces are reputed to be among the most competent in the SNA, particularly the Gorgor special forces and the Haram'ad (Cheetah) units. But attempts at transforming the SNA into a cohesive national fighting force remain compromised by perennial problems of corruption, poor military leadership and clanism. Indeed, Gorgor special forces are the only units in the SNA, barring the Danab, capable of carrying out kinetic offensive operations.

Turkey, however, has failed to insulate the Somali forces it has trained from political machinations. This was most clearly visible in April 2021 when Gorgor and Haram'ad forces were implicated in violence against civilians protesting Farmaajo's unconstitutional attempts to extend his term. It turned out that their chains of command had been superseded by then-NISA Director Fahad Yasin, who gave them their orders at that time. These forces have also been accused of conducting operations in the interests of their respective clan leaders. It is instructive that Turkey has apparently faced no reputational consequences for these incidents.

Erdogan has also sought to project Turkish influence in the Horn through the sale of combat drones and other military materiel. Bayraktar TB2 drones remain the most well-known of such products; they are widely considered to have been crucial in turning the tide in civil conflicts in both Libya and Ethiopia. In April 2023, UN investigators ruled that Turkey had violated the arms embargo on Somalia by covertly delivering Bayraktar drones to the Somali government in 2021. At the time, both Ankara and Mogadishu denied their existence, but since the lifting of the UN arms embargo in late 2023, Turkish drones are now operated openly. Still, this has not been without controversy, as demonstrated by incidents such as the Turkish strike on Afgooye in March 2024, in which tens of civilians are reported to have been killed.

Turkish drones in Somalia operate under less restrictive rules of engagement than equivalent US drone strikes, merely requiring a single military officer on the ground. The lifting of the UN arms embargo on Somalia, and the accompanying reduction in checks and balances on various armaments, may precipitate a significant investment in drones by Somalia. But this comes with risks, as Al-Shabaab will certainly seek to get its hands on any advanced technology; reports indicate that the jihadists are already using cheaper, commercial drones.

EGYPT: OLD PLAYER, NEW GAME

Egypt is an old player in Somalia. The North African state is today a significantly diminished power but still retains a keen interest in Somalia. Cairo developed close ties with newly independent Somalia in 1960. As part of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's attempts to develop Pan-Arabism, Pan-African solidarity and African cooperation. Egypt was the first Arab power to dispatch cultural missions to Somalia to 'Arabise' the country, and it played a role in making Somalia a member of the Arab League. It provided weapons and military officers to train army recruits and offered economic loans during the 1960s and 1970s. And Egypt repeatedly helped mobilise support against Ethiopia on behalf of Somalia during the Ogaden War.²⁰

Egypt's contemporary political relationship with Somalia is, in large part, centred on shared Arab and Islamic ties, and driven by Egypt's desire for Somalia to act as a counterbalance against its geo-strategic foe, Ethiopia. Tense relations between Egypt and Ethiopia are, in large part, about the vast Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) that Cairo perceives as an existential threat to its use of the Nile waters.

President Hassan Sheikh enjoyed good relations with Cairo during his first term and, in 2013, Egypt re-opened its embassy in Mogadishu after years of operating from Nairobi. The arrival of Farmaajo to the Somali presidency in 2017, however, signalled a protracted downturn in Egyptian-Somali relations, and the so-called 'tripartite' alliance in 2019 drove a wedge between Mogadishu and Cairo.

Under Farmaajo, Somalia's refusal to support the Arab League's stance in favour of Egypt over the Renaissance Dam, coupled with its closer ties with Ethiopia, saw a cooling of relations between the two countries. Egypt's hosting in 2020 of mid-level functionaries from Somaliland and Puntland without prior coordination with Mogadishu further strained ties.²¹ Discussions with Somaliland centred on the possible development of a military base on its territory, and these talks led to the cancellation of an educational cooperation protocol between Somalia and Egypt.

However, following the second inauguration of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud in June 2022, relations with Egypt warmed once again. Egypt stepped up diplomacy in Somalia, and broadened its bilateral ties to encompass development, security and trade matters. Most recently, following the announcement of the Ethiopia-Somaliland MOU, Egyptian President El-Sisi firmly asserted Cairo's opposition to the agreement, stating, "We will not allow anyone to threaten Somalia or come near Somalia. I am saying this very clearly, don't test Egypt and try to threaten its brothers, especially if our brothers asked us to be with them."²² And in March, officials from the Egypt Civil Aviation Authority travelled to Somalia for talks about beginning direct flights between Cairo and Mogadishu.

²⁰ Sahan Research archive.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

Cairo seized on the tumult generated by the Somaliland-Ethiopia MoU to withdraw from the stalled GERD negotiations and vocally proclaim its support for Mogadishu in the face of 'Ethiopian aggression.' While it has offered to provide military support to Somalia— in reality it is not in a position to offer practical support against Al-Shabaab. Egypt's pan-Arab rhetoric is well-received in Somalia, but it is primarily intended for Ethiopian ears. When the Muslim Brotherhood assumed office post-Arab Spring, some Egyptian politicians demanded Cairo back Ethiopian insurgent groups in the Ogaden and Oromia regions.

Egypt has few trade ties to Somalia, and far fewer economic interests in Somalia than its Gulf rivals. It has supported renewable energy projects in Somalia, though, including the development of a solar power plant at the cost of USD 4.5 million.

More complex for the Egyptian government with Somalia is its shared history of influence by the Muslim Brotherhood, founded by the Egyptian Islamic scholar Hassan al-Banna in 1928. Decades later, in the 1970s, a group of Somali Muslim Brotherhood formed the Al Islah movement, the antecedent of the current ruling Damul Jadiid faction. Damul Jadiid split from Al-Islah in 2006-2007 when some 300 members formed the new movement, with two founding members of Al Islah, Sheikh Mohamed Yousuf and Sheikh Mohamed Garyare. The Islamisation of the Somali state and society continued through this period as Islamist movements, both extreme and moderate, increasingly came to the fore. Today, in large part due to the influence and interests of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as roots in the Muslim Brotherhood, it is nearly inconceivable that a government in Mogadishu would not manifest an Islamist character.

IRAN: THE ABSENTEE ACTOR

Iran is a marginal actor in the Horn of Africa; its interests in the region have significantly declined in recent decades. It maintains low-level trade with major regional economies and supplies petrochemicals, pharmaceuticals and carpets, and Kenya is a leading exporter of tea to Iran. In 2023 the Gulf state launched an exhibition to market its civilian drone technology in Nairobi. And the Iranian Red Crescent runs health clinics in Kenya and other Horn states. Iranian scholarships are less popular than ones offered by Arab Gulf states and Turkey.²³

Iran's interests in the Horn have been dominated by a tussle for Islamic global leadership with Saudi Arabia, and the protection of a very small Shia community in Kenya and Tanzania from a Wahhabi campaign to brand them as 'apostates' and ostracise them. Tehran has no visibly active diplomacy in Somalia at this time, though this could change in the future. But the smuggling of Iranian arms has been persistent, with some ending up in the hands of Al-Shabaab and Islamic State in Somalia (ISS/Da'esh). Iran's stance on the Gaza conflict, its support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and its willingness to use force to pressure Israel, all enjoy popular support among many Muslims in the Horn – even those who regard Shia as heretics or 'misguided'.²⁴

OUTLOOK

Islamic middle powers are poised to become the dominant external players in the Horn in the years to come. Possible resistance to such an eventuality is likely to come from Kenya and Ethiopia, two regional powers with their own assertive foreign policies and strong vested security interests. Nairobi and Addis have been following the changing geopolitical dynamics with keen interest. Both want to harness the economic benefits of partnership with Turkey and the Gulf

²³ Sahan Research May 2024.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

states but worry about the deepening middle power security and military involvement in the wider region. Turkey's defence pact with Somalia and Ankara's long-term naval ambitions in the Red Sea and the western Indian Ocean has generated some unease, not least because both harbour maritime ambitions. Addis dispatched a delegation to Ankara in April 2024 to convey its concerns and explain its interest to develop a naval outpost in Somaliland.

Ethiopia's Institute of Foreign Affairs, a research agency affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in February 2024 published a 150-page book in Amharic entitled "The Grand Strategy of Two Waters" that encapsulates the Horn state's ambitions to exercise full autonomy over the Nile River and to gain access to the Red Sea.²⁵ Kenya, in its recently-unveiled grand strategy, wants to enhance its coast guard and naval capabilities to protect its 'maritime domain' and 'blue economy' resources.²⁶

The Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) is central to mitigating the destabilising influence of Turkey and the Gulf states in Somalia. In its current state, the regional body is ill-equipped to deal with the challenge, and parallel attempts to foster healthier and cooperative Gulf-Horn relations have not been successful for a host of reasons. Reviving IGAD's role as a forum for political dialogue and as the primary locus for multilateral diplomacy in the Horn may offer the best prospects of harnessing the benefit of external competition and reducing harm.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, Turkey and Gulf states have intensified a form of destabilising competition in Somalia through their often-unilateral strategic actions. While it has ebbed and flowed, the Ankara-Mogadishu relationship is now Somalia's strongest, since Turkish re-engagement post-2011. And it appears to be further solidifying amidst reports that Turkey will take responsibility for the reform of the Somali National Army and its national security architecture. How this plays out is yet to be seen, but it comes with a backdrop of rising tensions between Abu Dhabi and Ankara across the Gulf and Horn. More broadly, shifting rivalries and dispensed patronage have helped shape Somalia's current political and security dynamics today. The rivalries of the Gulf famously tend not to stay in the Gulf.

For example, Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea have all seen geo-strategic tussling among Gulf powers for access to their strategic positions on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. For both Sudan and Somalia, limited state-building and democratic gains have been rolled back by authoritarian-minded Gulf influence. The continued fragility of the Horn, despite the rise of Kenya as an 'anchor state' in response to Ethiopia's internal instability, means that several Gulf capitals will continue to aggressively exploit political weakness to impose their own securitist agendas.

In Somalia, political elite have become particularly adept at publicly playing off the interests of the West, offering lip service to democratic norms while advancing the more furtive interests of their Gulf patrons. The controversial passage of Chapters 1-4 of Somalia's Provisional Constitution arguably encapsulates this dynamic. Villa Somalia has moved ahead with the constitutional review process at the request of the international community, while including numerous clauses deferring to Sharia law, a likely nod to its Islamic middle power allies.

²⁵ Walta News Agency, New book titled "The Grand Strategy of Two Waters" launched, February 2024

²⁶ Kenya Coastguard Strategic Plan 2023/24–2027/28 (abridged version)

Still, the renewed influence of Qatar and the growing leverage of Turkey in Mogadishu may yet embroil Somalia in more actively hostile geo-strategic Gulf state competition. A domestically embattled Villa Somalia is seeking international allies where it can, particularly to counter-balance perceived Ethiopian aggression. Simultaneously, we may see a rise in the para-diplomacy of Somalia's Federal Member States, with Gulf relations to serve as a bulwark against abrogation of the democratic intentions of the original constitutional review process.

But the continued fragility of the Somali state may throw all these alliances and competitions into disarray. While Qatar is widely understood to be actively promoting 'peace negotiations' with Al-Shabaab, the return of the extremist group to Mogadishu will not pacify the long-unsettled peripheries of the country. Jubaland, Puntland and much of South West State, under the protection of the Ethiopian army, remain antithetical to Al-Shabaab and will likely deploy forces to resist its encroachment, no matter if it assumes authority in Mogadishu. How Turkey might respond to an Afghanistan-style situation engineered by its erstwhile if frustrating ally Qatar remains unknown, but this would likely jeopardise its significant investments in the country's security forces and possible oil exploitation. Similarly, the UAE is highly likely to continue its military support for its allied FMS. And so Somalia's crowded and chaotic security sector might yet become even more unstable, particularly with the ATMIS draw-down scheduled to conclude by the end of 2024. Whatever happens in the coming months, the complex and nuanced interactions between Somalia, Turkey, and the Gulf are surely set to continue.