

## Red Sea: Connector and Divider

Disruption Waves from the Arabian Gulf to the Horn of Africa

Annette Weber

The Red Sea is a vital pathway for goods, people, arms, and livestock. European trade with Asia passes through here as well as oil from the Gulf to the Mediterranean, and a sizeable amount of global marine cargo is hauled through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea into the Indian Ocean. In addition to its significance as a trade route, the Red Sea is a lane for migration between the Gulf and the Horn of Africa and a bridge for roving terrorists. Its water connects the Horn of Africa with the Gulf countries, although it also separates African and Arab political and social cultures. Moreover, many issues are contested in the Red Sea region, ranging from military control to political Islam. In order to avoid further rifts between the Horn of Africa countries as a consequence of the disruptive politics of the Gulf, the Horn needs to perceive itself as a region and find common interests rather than becoming fragmented and weakened. The stability of the Horn of Africa as well as the security of its trade routes are of vital interest to European countries and economies.

Today the Horn of Africa is among the most conflicted regions in the world. Civil wars in Sudan and South Sudan, frozen border conflicts between Ethiopia and Eritrea, as well as border conflicts between Sudan and South Sudan are constant sources of instability and violence. The region is the birthplace of the two newest African states (Eritrea in 1993 and South Sudan in 2011). Furthermore, jihadist groups have been operating in the region since the mid-1990s, resulting in conflicts in Somalia and several severe attacks in the region – mainly in countries along the Swahili Coast. Ethiopia has experienced waves of public uprisings and demonstrations in response to a state

of emergency that has weakened the government.

On the other side of the shore, recent developments are shaking the assumption of political and social stability in the Gulf countries. The recent arrests of more than 200 influential individuals – including princes and other members of the royal family – in Saudi Arabia in November on allegations of corruption and embezzlement are unprecedented and call the established social contract into question. The split in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) last June tore at the fabric of the GCC, which is far from being mended in the near future and might leave insurmountable rifts be-

**Map: Red Sea Region**



**Note:** The boundaries and names shown on this map are only for illustration purposes. SWP is not taking any position on disputes about territories or exact line of borders.

hind. There are several root causes of the higher tension levels and increased nervousness in the Gulf that can be identified: the Saudi-led war in Yemen (2015–), the tensions between the Gulf and Iran, as well as the plunge in oil prices in June 2014.

Beginning with the Yemeni war and the resulting GCC crisis, the tectonic shifts on one side of the Red Sea have changed the power balances on the adjacent shores. The changes are being felt most brutally in Ethiopia, which, before the war in Yemen, was the default hegemon in the region. Simultaneously, other countries such as Sudan and Eritrea are rising from obscurity due to the attention being given them by the Gulf countries, Europe, and the United States, albeit for different reasons.

### **Relevance: Regional and Global**

*Trade routes and investment.* The Red Sea is one of the main trade routes for German exports: 16 percent of German exports go to

Asia, and 20 percent of its imports are from there. The main passages go through the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, and the Suez Canal.

Trade between the two shores of the Red Sea is of great importance for the region: Somalia's main exports are livestock and charcoal to Saudi Arabia. More than 70 percent of Saudi investments in agriculture and food go to Africa, primarily Sudan and Ethiopia, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) closely following in investment.

*Piracy* became a massive obstacle for trade in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden in the mid-2000s. With an absent and later weak state in Somalia since 1991, the enterprise of hijacking merchant ships became lucrative; in 2008 alone, 111 attacks – including 42 successful hijackings – took place. More than 263 crew members were held hostage just in 2009. An EU maritime force was established in 2008 with a mandate to secure the World Food Programme's humanitarian shipments for the people of Somalia as well as to secure a corridor for merchant vessels passing through the Gulf of Aden. Other countries such as Russia, South Korea, China, and Iran have also sent vessels to secure their trade routes.

*Military bases.* Djibouti has the largest number of military bases of foreign nations on the African continent. The US base, Camp Lemonnier, has thousands of soldiers stationed there, and there are reports about the United States expanding its geostrategic interests in Eritrea as well. China has also built its first base in Djibouti, which has made the United States nervous. NATO, France, Japan, Germany, and Saudi Arabia also have military bases in the small country. Turkey just opened its largest overseas military base in Mogadishu in October.

The security impact of the GCC crisis can be illustrated with the Eritrean Port of Assab. The port is south of the country, roughly 50 km from the Ethiopian border, but 600 km from the Eritrean capital. Before the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Port of Assab was used by Ethiopia. After the war, it was allegedly used by Iran in the mid-2000s and is now being lent to

the UAE as a naval base for Operation Restoring Hope in Yemen. In September 2016, Houthi rebels fired grenades at the port; a month later they fired on a US war ship in the Red Sea before the United States retaliated with rockets on Houthi positions on the Yemeni coast. This exemplifies the regional as well as international dimensions of the Red Sea and its acute vulnerability. Between the Port of Assab and the Yemeni coast, the distance is roughly 60 km, but the smallest strait, the Bab-el-Mandeb, only measures 27 km between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. This triggers security concerns that ripple beyond the Red Sea. The security for shipping lanes – currently assigned to EU Naval Force Operation Atalanta in the Gulf of Aden – needs to be assessed, and further measures to prevent terrorist operations, including using ships to block the strait, need to be enacted.

*Terrorism/jihadism.* The significance of the Red Sea as a security nexus became apparent when al-Qaida operatives crossed the Gulf to attack US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998. Despite the demise of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, jihadism is thriving in the Horn of Africa and Yemen. The attack on the USS *Cole* by al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in 2000 was the first terrorist operation in the Red Sea, followed by war in Somalia and attacks in Kenya and Uganda. There is no formal cooperation between jihadists on the Arabian Peninsula and al-Shabaab in Somalia; however, jihadists, weapons, and ideologies travel freely through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. The missile attack by Houthis last July on a UAE vessel involved in the Yemeni coalition shows that the Red Sea could easily become a battleground.

*Migration.* The Red Sea plays a significant role in migration between the two shores. However, migration from the Horn of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula is rarely just an attempt to reach Europe but rather a migration movement to the Gulf itself. Hundreds of thousands of migrants from the Horn are seeking employment in the Gulf countries. Many have lived there for

three or four generations and supply the financial backbone for many Horn of African economies through their remittances. Whereas the majority of Sudanese and Ethiopians came to the Gulf as regular working migrants (in construction and domestic services), a smaller number crossed the Red Sea or the Arabian Sea from Puntland to reach Yemen and then cross into more affluent Gulf countries.

### **Three Waves of Gulf Disruption**

In the last couple of years, there have been three waves from the Gulf to the Horn of Africa. The first wave came with the fall in oil prices in 2014 and the need for economic diversification. The second was created by the decision of some African states to fight the Houthis in Yemen under a Saudi-led alliance in 2015. The last wave, in 2017, was created by the rift among the three leading GCC members – Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the one side, and Qatar on the other – forcing African states to take sides, which has had a fragmenting effect on the already fragile region.

Whether these waves will lead to further disruption in the Horn of Africa or constitute the need for collective security has yet to be seen. What is unambiguous, however, is the tectonic shift in power that the waves have produced in the Horn. In the following, the three waves and their consequences regarding shifts in power in the Horn of Africa are examined further while focusing on the cases of Ethiopia, Sudan, and Eritrea.

#### **First Wave:**

##### **Economic Changes and Diversification**

The first wave came with the fall in oil prices in 2014. The Gulf countries needed to diversify their economies and did so by various measures. In addition, they changed their food security strategies and started investing in food production and agribusiness across the shore in the Horn of Africa. Besides the investment in agribusiness, the UAE's DP World invested heavily

in the ports along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and is now administering to most ports in the region, from Kismayo to Djibouti. There is increasing nervousness about what such a monopoly could mean if future pricing policies are put out of the reach of state governments.

*Ethiopia*, a country heavily reliant on agro-investments from the UAE, India, and Saudi Arabia as well as European countries, feels cornered from the activities on the other side of the Red Sea. The landlocked hegemon, by default, lost its access to the Port of Assab in its war with Eritrea (1998–2000).

The increasing dependency – from port access to investment as a source of foreign currency – in combination with the increased militarization of its surroundings has made Ethiopia nervous. For one, after the October 2016 demonstrations in larger cities and rural areas alike, the government reacted harshly: Hundreds of people were killed and thousands were imprisoned. The root causes of the demonstrations included land-rights issues and political participation. In addition, Ethiopia's historical infrastructural project, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), has opened another wound in its already unharmonious relationship with Egypt. Ethiopia is accusing Egypt of meddling with politics in Eritrea and South Sudan as well as in the domestic politics of Ethiopia in retaliation for the Renaissance Dam, which challenges Egypt's claim to a fixed quota of the Nile waters.

The GERD is about to be completed in 2018 and will provide electricity to Ethiopia and Sudan. The dam is a fundamental irritation to the Egyptians and has already led to announcements by Egyptian officials of military action to stop its completion and filling. The power afforded Egypt through its GCC affiliation could tip the delicate balance in the region even further. Sudan currently has a strong position because it is a member of the alliance in the Yemeni war, which could create a predicament for the rival powers of Egypt and Ethiopia.

*Sudan* also has Saudi Arabia and the UAE as investors in agriculture. Hundreds of

thousands of Sudanese migrants are working in the Gulf, and their remittances are essential for the economy and their families back home.

The Saudi and UAE maritime bases in Eritrea and Djibouti as well as the massive investments in agriculture by Gulf countries in the Horn of Africa countries reflect the ties between security and economic interests. However, the region around the Red Sea does not perceive itself to be a region, nor are there efforts to establish a collective security or common trade architecture, which could counter – or at least buffer – the impact of the Gulf waves of disruption.

### **Second Wave: War in Yemen**

The second wave was created by the decision of some African states to fight the Houthis in Yemen under a Saudi-led alliance. Unlike Egypt, which is supporting the war but not sending troops, Sudan and Eritrea sent troops and provided a naval base for the alliance in Assab. This has led to a rise in status of the two Horn of Africa countries, which had previously been politically isolated and in dire need of currency to boost their economies. Saudi Arabia is relying on allies from the Horn in its war in Yemen. Besides military bases being provided in Djibouti (Saudi Arabia) and Eritrea (UAE), Sudan and Eritrea are contributing troops and receiving foreign currency in exchange. The normalization process resulting from the Saudi coalition as well as European interest in cooperation on irregular migration has helped the governments in Khartoum and Asmara to regain power domestically and strengthened their regional standing.

*Sudan* plays an equally active role in the Saudi alliance in Yemen. There are reports of more than 400 Sudanese soldiers having been killed in Yemen, and it is assumed that the number of soldiers sent there is in the thousands. In addition, the Yemeni war has functioned similarly to the final battles

of the Ghaddafi regime in Libya, from which Darfur rebels walked away with scores of arms, money, and ammunition. In the war in Yemen, members of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces are allegedly being sent for training and to earn money. This military-economic link between the war in Yemen and Darfur and the wider Sahel region has so far been unexplored.

### **Third Wave:**

#### **GCC Split – and the Role of Political Islam**

The rift among the three leading GCC members – Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the one side, and Qatar on the other – created the last storm in the Horn of Africa, with countries being forced to take sides, resulting in a fragmenting of the already fragile region.

*Tectonic shifts.* There are tectonic shifts occurring in the crisis landscape around the Red Sea. The discord among the countries of the GCC not only disturbs relations, economic flows, and trust on the Arabian Peninsula, it also has critical effects on the Horn of Africa. The shores of the Red Sea are moving closer together as a result of the war in Yemen, the migration of people, the trade route, and roving jihadis.

New conflicts erupted in 2017 in the Gulf region among GCC members. Saudi Arabia and the UAE wanted to coerce Qatar to follow their anti-Iranian regional agenda. Qatar refused to follow suit, and diplomatic as well as economic and trade relations were cut, leaving Qatar isolated. Beyond the inner-Gulf problems that this crisis has brought, it has heavy repercussions for the broader region, specifically across the Red Sea in the Horn of Africa. Qatar was a mediator in the Horn, such as for the border issues between Eritrea and Djibouti as well as in Darfur. Eritrea refused a request by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to cut ties with Qatar, but later went ahead and publicly criticized the country. After the critique from Eritrea and the siding of Djibouti with the other GCC countries, Qatar recalled their troops from their peacekeeping mission in the border dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti.

A similar problem is likely to arise in peace mediations in Darfur, which are currently chaired by Qatar. Although Sudan was able to remain neutral and support Kuwait's efforts to mediate between the GCC countries, Sudan's dependency on Saudi Arabia and the UAE might force it to take sides against Qatar. Moreover, the crisis among the GCC countries is further disrupting the Horn of Africa region.

#### *The Economy of Political Islam*

Although Saudi Arabia and the UAE are investors in agricultural projects and the UAE is administrating almost all ports on the African shores of the Red Sea, the Saudi's aggressive push of Salafism is not looked upon favorably – both in Christian- and Muslim-majority countries in the Horn of Africa. One aspect of the GCC split that has a potential impact on the Horn of Africa is the clash of ideologies. This will most likely manifest itself in Somalia and Sudan first. The battle between Salafism and other forms of political Islam – including the various branches of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood – might bring more conflict to the Horn than is currently being suggested. In Sudan, this is reflected in the struggles of the Islamic movement to retain power and the trend of the younger generation joining the so-called Islamic State rather than following the political Islam of Hassan al-Turabi – in power since 1989 – and the National Islamic Front. The increasing number of madrasas and mosques paid for, and prayed in, by Saudi Salafi preachers is visible in Sudan, despite the government's friendly relations with the Muslim Brotherhood. Sudan was supportive of President Mohamed Morsi's election in Egypt and hosted several members of the Muslim Brotherhood who fled after General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi took power in Cairo. Many of them fled further to Qatar. Numerous intellectuals and members of the Islamic movement – inside and outside the government in Khartoum – therefore feel much closer to Qatar and disagree with the Saudi

school of Islam (Wahabism), but for economic and political reasons, they cannot come out in favor of Qatar. However, Sudan has remained neutral and supports the mediation efforts by Kuwait.

Similarly, the quest for a dominant ideology could hit Somalia hard. The political landscape is dominated by political parties affiliated with branches of the Muslim Brotherhood. The competing ideology in Somalia is provided by the jihadist teachings of al-Shabaab. However, it is not yet clear how an increase in Salafi mosques and schools would shape the future of Islam and politics in the country. Another factor is the influence of the Turkish schools of political Islam in the country as well as their scholarship programs for Somali students.

### **Political Consequences**

Most apparent is the rift inside Somalia and between Somalia and Somaliland. Three semi-autonomous provinces of Somalia cut ties with Qatar, whereas the government in Mogadishu sided with the government in Doha. The GCC split directly weakened the central government and led to further fragmentation in the country. Two of the provinces have ports managed and owned by the UAE, as does northeastern Somaliland, all of which sided with Saudi Arabia. Even more influential is the high number of Somali expats living and working in the Gulf – on whose remittances many families in Somalia rely. Prioritizing the alliance with the investors over the unity of the country will have lasting consequences for the stability in Somalia.

*Sudan* fears that an emboldened Egypt could derail the GERD dam in Ethiopia and force Sudan to publicly side with Egypt. Whereas the Yemeni coalition brought the necessary economic boost and political recognition for Khartoum to be self-confident and strong, the GCC crisis has presented Sudan with a quandary.

In the case of Sudan, much will depend on developments following the United

States' recent partial lifting of economic sanctions in early October. However, the government in Khartoum feels emboldened by the alliance with Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen as well as by the normalization resulting from migration cooperation with the EU. Already there is a sense of reluctance by Khartoum to reengage in peace talks with Darfur and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/-North in Kordofan and Blue Nile due to this perceived "new normal" by Khartoum.

These political tradeoffs come with a price, which will be paid by neighboring *Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa is home to the African Union, and Ethiopia has been the chair of the regional organization Intergovernmental Authority on Development for more than a decade. It is leading in economic growth and infrastructural investment and is Europe's closest ally in migration management. However, the Yemeni war and its alliances across the shores of the Red Sea have changed this position for Ethiopia, whose position has begun to weaken due to the militarization of the Red Sea shores by the UAE, close contact with Ethiopia's arch enemy, Eritrea, and the elevation of Egypt – a serious contender for regional power. It could also bring about the hardening of a front in the Horn of Africa through alliances with either the Saudi-UAE axis or Qatar, which is the odd one out in the GCC. Considering the instability in the region, this is risky.

An additional geostrategic interest by the United States in the Red Sea could turn the balance of power even further away from landlocked Ethiopia toward more authoritarian and repressive regimes, such as Eritrea.

### **The Region and Beyond**

The crisis nexus is spanning across the Red Sea into the Sahel region. On the other shore, it has reached relations between the GCC and Iran and is reverberating beyond the region.

*Iran* is accused of supporting the Houthis militias, who drove Yemeni President

Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi into exile in Saudi Arabia. Iran has also kept up good relations with Sudan – Iran allegedly co-owned an arms and ammunition facility in Sudan (Yarmouk), which was bombed by Israel in 2012. As part of the negotiations with the CIA on counter-terrorism, the government in Khartoum was asked to cut their ties with Iran in 2016. Keeping Iran out of the region is of interest to Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Israel, but it limits Sudan's strategic relations.

*Egypt* has influence on the Red Sea – primarily, but not solely, because of their control of the Suez Canal. How significant this control can be on international trade could be seen during the 1967–1975 blockade, when – as a reaction to the Six-Day War with Israel – Egypt stopped all shipping trade through the canal. The tensions between the two contenders – Ethiopia and Egypt – for regional power are fueled by the spillover from the GCC crisis. Whereas Egypt is seemingly gaining power through its alliance with Saudi Arabia, it lacks trust, influence, and strong relations in the Horn of Africa region and clout in the Gulf.

*Turkey* has positioned itself clearly as a “brother in need” to Somalia and Qatar. It has the biggest military base in Somalia, is in charge of the port as well as the airport in Mogadishu, and it has developed close relations with Sudan. The government in Ankara has no problem with Iran and is closer to Russia than any country in the Gulf. In recent regional power shifts, Turkey is a mover and has placed its geo-strategic cards well.

*Israel* has an interest in the Red Sea and bombed alleged arms convoys near Port Sudan heading for Hamas territory in 2009. Three years later, Sudan complained to the UN Security Council that Israel was bombing the Yarmouk facility, close to Khartoum. Israel argued that the facility was an Iranian munitions factory supplying weapons to Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The growth of Iran's influence does not benefit Jerusalem's interests.

The increasing significance of Gulf countries' politics for the Horn of Africa is reverberating in the Red Sea region and far beyond.

### **Repressive Regimes – Hard to Maneuver**

External actors often overestimate the influence they have on one side of the Red Sea or the other. Given the authoritarian systems prevalent on both shores, their interests are less regional and more focused on the stability of their regimes. This makes it harder to establish a system of collective security. For outside actors, it is prudent to engage with regional organizations in an effort to dissolve tensions.

None of the countries in the region are democratic. However, the Gulf countries are far more anti-democratic than most of their counterparts on the African shore. The political foundations of the Kingdoms and Emirates in the Gulf mainly remain stable due to family relations, clientelistic and rentier systems, and the absence of freedoms. This model is hardly relevant in the Horn of Africa. However, an increase in political influence from the Gulf and the legitimization of reduced freedoms and repressive strategies should be a worrying sign for the citizens of the Horn of Africa.

Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Saudi Arabia already have the means to repress any attempts at transformation. In Somalia, statehood is fragmented, and governance is far removed from the state apparatus. The government of Sudan is involved in two civil war fronts, and there is an arrest warrant for its president from the International Criminal Court with charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Europe's influence is limited in the region, as is the influence of the world's powers. Waning US political influence, the rise of China in economic, infrastructural, as well as military matters in the region, and the role of middle powers such as Iran and Turkey bring an explosive mix to the region.

The interests of Europe and Germany, in particular, are clear: securing the trade routes through the Red Sea, keeping channels of communication open with all stakeholders, and engaging with Horn of Africa countries in matters of irregular migration.

Analyzing the Yemeni war and engaging in a negotiated solution should be paramount – the military engagement of the Saudi coalition and the United States is detrimental to a diplomatic approach. The escalation of sectarian hostilities between the Sunna and Shia – as currently being displayed in the GCC crisis – as well as a widening rift between countries and populations in the Horn are dangerous and counterproductive.

Europe can promote itself as a partner in support of a regional approach, furthering economic cooperation and conflict prevention rather than fragmentation and geopolitical escalations. Europe can provide technical expertise in water management and agro-industries as an alternative to the escalation of a Nile water-quota war between Egypt and Ethiopia. Inclusion and political participation will ultimately engage citizens with their leaders, not repressive policies to ensure a status quo.

Fighting irregular migration has to be a long-term investment in the region's dynamics. The management of expectations is needed rather than the promise of quick solutions for bad governance, war, famine, and drought. Otherwise, the political trade-offs for supporting the security apparatuses of repressive governments will yield very little stability.

The perception of the Horn of Africa as a region and the need for collective security would be preferable to further fragmentation and should be supported by Germany and the European Union.

© Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2017  
All rights reserved

These Comments reflect the author's views.

**SWP**  
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4  
10719 Berlin  
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-100  
www.swp-berlin.org  
swp@swp-berlin.org

ISSN 1861-1761