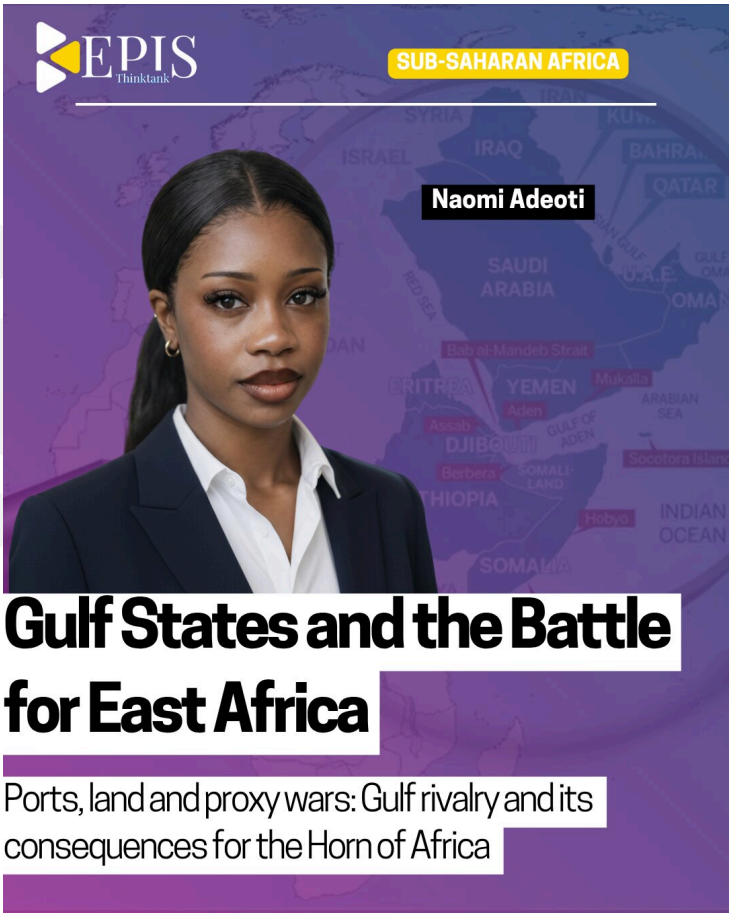
Gulf States and the Battle for East Africa

28 MARCH 2026

Naomi Adeoti



The Horn of Africa sits at one of the most consequential maritime junctions in the world. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the strategic maritime chokepoint linking the Mediterranean–Suez route to the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden is just 16 miles wide at its narrowest point, handles roughly 12 to 15% of global maritime trade in normal operating conditions, including 12% of seaborne oil flows. The fragility of this corridor has been made viscerally clear in recent years, when the Houthis, an Iran-backed Yemini armed movement, began attacking commercial shipping in the Red Sea. The campaign caused vessel transits through the strait to fall by more

than 50%, pushed shipping rates on Asia-Europe up by an average of 230%, and cost Egypt an estimated $7 billion in Suez Canal revenues in 2024 alone. Less examined, however, is the Horn of Africa being implicated in the networks driving this instability. Houthi long-range capabilities rely on smuggling routes running across the Red Sea from Somalia, and those routes have become increasingly two-way. A February 2025 UN Security Council report confirmed that Houthi representatives held physical meetings with al-Shabaab in Somalia in July and September 2024, transferring Iranian-made drones and surface-to-air missiles in exchange for piracy support and arms smuggling.

Since 2015, Gulf states, most notably the UAE and Saudi Arabia, have dramatically expanded their presence across Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, and Eritrea in both scale and scope. Gulf involvement now spans ports, finance, agriculture, and security in ways that increasingly blur the line between commercial partnership and geopolitical positioning. This brief argues that as part of Gulf states' investment in East Africa, they are actively integrating the Horn into a wider Red Sea geopolitical system, reshaping regional political economies through engagement that operates primarily via bilateral arrangements rather than institutionalised frameworks.

Over the past decade, the UAE has become one of the most significant external investors on the African continent. Total UAE investments across Africa exceeded $110 billion between 2019 and 2023, making Abu Dhabi the continent's fourth largest investor globally, and the largest among Gulf Cooperation Council states. Non-energy trade between African countries and the UAE grew from $20 billion in 2012 to $60 billion in 2022. This reflects a deliberate strategy to position the UAE as a logistical and commercial intermediary between Africa, the Gulf, Europe, and Asia. The fact that $110 billion worth of annual UAE-Europe trade transits the Red Sea, creates a direct commercial incentive to secure logistical footholds along the African coastline. Control over logistics routes reduces vulnerability to chokepoints while simultaneously generating political leverage over states dependent on those routes.

The primary instrument of this strategy has been port infrastructure. Through DP World and AD Ports Group, the UAE has built interconnected maritime corridors linking Gulf shipping hubs to African markets and inland trade routes. In the Horn specifically, the Berbera Port development in Somaliland, valued at over $440 million, is strategically significant because it provides an alternative trade corridor for landlocked Ethiopia, which routes roughly 90% of its trade through Djibouti. By offering Ethiopia an additional maritime outlet, the UAE gains long-term influence over one of Africa's largest and fastest-growing economies while simultaneously reducing Djibouti's monopoly over Ethiopian trade. The launch of a direct shipping route between Jebel Ali and Berbera in October 2025 further integrates the Horn into Emirati-controlled logistics networks. Similarly, the UAE has committed to a $6 billion agreement to develop the Abu Amama

port and economic zone on Sudan's Red Sea coast, further consolidating its maritime architecture in the region.

Agricultural investment represents a third pillar of Gulf engagement and is often framed as food security policy but functions more accurately as supply chain control. According to the Land Matrix database, Gulf states acquired more than 2 million hectares of agricultural land abroad between 2000 and 2022, with Sudan and Ethiopia among the primary targets. Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah's 'Initiative for Saudi Agricultural Investment Abroad', launched in 2009, drove large-scale land acquisitions across both countries, including a 2011 commitment by Saudi Star Agricultural Development to develop 300,000 hectares in Ethiopia's Gambella region, while Qatar's Hassad Food committed $500 million to Sudan's agricultural sector. The framing of this investment as a food security hedge is not entirely convincing as the UAE ranks among the most food-secure countries in the world, while both Sudan and Ethiopia face chronic food insecurity. The more plausible interpretation is that Gulf states are securing upstream control over agricultural production and export routes, thereby insulating themselves from global supply shocks while simultaneously gaining economic and political influence in host states. A consistent pattern across the Horn has been that port and agricultural projects are followed by arms exports, security training agreements, or defence partnerships. Economic presence has, in many cases, preceded political leverage, suggesting that Gulf engagement in the Horn is best understood as a strategy to build influence over trade corridors, and strategically located coastal states along one of the world's most important maritime routes.

3. Somalia and Sudan: Case Studies in Gulf Influence

Somalia illustrates how this model of engagement operates at the domestic level. While Gulf involvement is most visible through infrastructure and port agreements, the more significant impact has been political and security penetration at multiple levels of governance. The 2017 Gulf crisis revealed how external rivalries can be internalised within Somalia's fragmented federal system, with different Somali political actors aligning with competing Gulf states.

Security cooperation has reinforced this embedding further. The UAE has provided training and financial support to Somali security forces, including at the federal member state level, positioning itself within the state's core security architecture. This form of engagement creates long-term influence as it builds relationships with security actors who often outlast political administrations. Somalia's decision in January 2026 to cancel bilateral agreements with the UAE, citing actions undermining national sovereignty, and to sign a new defence agreement with Qatar, followed by Turkey deploying fighter jets to Mogadishu in a visible show of support,

demonstrates how Somalia has become a theatre in which external powers compete for influence through domestic institutions.

Sudan presents a different but equally instructive picture, where Gulf influence has been exercised primarily through financial support and involvement in political transitions rather than federal fragmentation. Following the removal of Omar al-Bashir in 2019, Saudi Arabia and the UAE pledged approximately $3 billion in financial assistance to Sudan's transitional authorities. While framed as stabilisation support, this assistance also positioned Gulf states as key external stakeholders in Sudan's political transition, giving them leverage over a government that was financially dependent on external backing.

4. Strategic Balancing in the Red Sea System

A common weakness in Western analysis of Gulf influence in the Horn is the treatment of African governments as passive recipients of external attention, when in reality many African governments have actively exploited Gulf competition for their own strategic and economic benefit. States such as Ethiopia, Somalia, and Djibouti have pursued deliberate diversification strategies, engaging multiple Gulf partners simultaneously in order to extract infrastructure investment, security assistance, and diplomatic backing without becoming overly dependent on any single actor. Djibouti's entire economic model, hosting US, Chinese, French, Japanese, and other foreign military facilities simultaneously, represents perhaps the most deliberate example of monetising geopolitical competition. Ethiopia has similarly maintained working relationships with the UAE on Berbera infrastructure, Saudi Arabia on agriculture and renewable energy, and Qatar on mediation and aviation precisely to avoid being drawn too deeply into any single patron's orbit.

However, this strategy of balancing external partners is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. With the crystallisation of two rival blocs, broadly the UAE, Israel, and Somaliland on one side, and Somalia, Qatar, Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia on the other, the space for neutrality has narrowed. External investment and security partnerships are increasingly tied to political alignment, meaning that states attempting to hedge risk losing support from competing partners. When that happens, the balancing strategy that has served smaller Horn states relatively well begins to break down.

The growing coordination between the Houthis in Yemen and al-Shabaab in Somalia adds an additional transregional security dimension to Red Sea and Horn of Africa dynamics. The Gulf of Aden, the body of water linking the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea between Yemen and Somalia, has become not just a shipping corridor but a conduit for financial flows and smuggling networks connecting militant groups on both sides of the Red Sea system. This cross-shore interaction means that instability in Yemen

now directly affects security conditions in the Horn, rather than remaining a separate conflict theatre. There is also a risk of tactical diffusion. Armed groups in the Horn could emulate Houthi tactics by adopting drone technology to threaten shipping routes, while the while the continued flow of smuggled weapons across the Gulf of Aden risks increasing the operational capacity of militant organisations and undermining African Union stabilisation efforts in Somalia. The security environment is therefore becoming increasingly interconnected and militarised in ways that individual Horn states cannot manage through diplomacy or internal security policy alone.

Taken together, Gulf engagement is reshaping governance dynamics in the Horn through the structure of bilateral economic and security relationships. Gulf states tend to operate through fast, state-to-state deals that combine infrastructure finance, political support, and security cooperation in single strategic partnerships. While this model is attractive to governments facing immediate fiscal or security pressures, it often bypasses domestic institutions and reinforces executive-level decision making and patronage networks rather than strengthening bureaucratic capacity or regulatory institutions. The growing military dimension, including training programmes, base access, arms transfers, and security agreements, further embeds external actors within domestic security architectures, increasing long-term political leverage. Influence therefore operates indirectly, through long-term dependency on investment and logistics infrastructure rather than through explicit political conditions.

6. Conclusion

Over the past decade, Gulf states have moved from peripheral investors to central geopolitical actors in the Horn of Africa. Their engagement reflects broader shifts in global trade, energy security, and strategic competition, as well as the escalating Saudi-UAE rivalry that has spilled well beyond its origins in Yemen and now shapes alignments from Sudan to Somaliland. The model of influence that has emerged is characterised by its embedded nature. Port infrastructure, agricultural land acquisition, financial support, and security cooperation function together, reshaping the political economies of Horn states gradually but in ways that are structurally significant.

The Horn of Africa is no longer a discrete regional system but part of an integrated Red Sea geopolitical space in which Gulf economic, political, and security competition directly shapes African political economies and conflict dynamics. This shift means that political and economic outcomes in the Horn will increasingly be determined as much by Middle Eastern strategic competition as by African domestic politics.