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**Emiratis, Saudis and Qataris cross the Red Sea: what are the Gulf monarchies doing in Africa?***Emiratis, Saudis and Qataris cross the Red Sea: what are the Gulf monarchies doing in Africa?**Abstract:*

Emiratis, Saudis and Qataris have crossed the Red Sea and entered sub-Saharan Africa to stay. They have consolidated their presence on the continent, which has taken a qualitative leap forward over the last fifteen years. The Gulf monarchies consider control over the security and navigation of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden as the safeguard to their internal stability, commercial interests and food security, and this dominance is only possible with a foothold on both shores.

The Emiratis, Saudis and Qataris see sub-Saharan Africa as a laboratory in which to test out interventions that further their objectives on the international stage, and they work in the region with the aim of building their status as an international power by acting as major brokers in the continent's affairs and conflicts. Thus, in recent years, Gulf states have opened dozens of embassies in sub-Saharan Africa and intervened diplomatically in African conflicts in order to increase their international prestige. The Saudis and Emiratis are also seeking to play a leading role in the fight against terrorism in West Africa, motivated by a desire to enhance their international reputation as serious partners in the fight against jihadism.

*Key words:*

United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Gulf monarchies, Horn of Africa, Red Sea.

**\*NOTE:** The ideas contained in the *Analysis Papers* are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

## Emiratíes, saudíes y qataríes cruzan el mar Rojo. ¿Qué hacen las monarquías del Golfo en África?

### Resumen:

Emiratíes, saudíes y qataríes han cruzado el mar Rojo y han llegado a África subsahariana para quedarse. Su presencia en el continente, que durante los últimos quince años ha dado un salto cualitativo, está consolidada. Las monarquías del Golfo necesitan mantener el control de la seguridad y de la navegación del mar Rojo y del golfo de Adén si quieren salvaguardar su estabilidad interna, sus intereses comerciales y su seguridad alimentaria, y este dominio sólo es posible estando presente en ambas orillas. Emiratíes, saudíes y qataríes consideran a África subsahariana como un laboratorio en el que poder ensayar intervenciones que favorezcan sus objetivos en la escena internacional, y trabajan en esta región con el objetivo de construirse un estatus de potencia internacional, mediante la actuación como actores de primer orden, en los asuntos y conflictos del continente. Así, durante los últimos años, los países del Golfo han abierto decenas de embajadas en África subsahariana y han intervenido diplomáticamente en conflictos africanos con el objetivo de aumentar su prestigio internacional. Saudíes y emiratíes buscan además desempeñar un papel destacado en la lucha antiterrorista en África occidental motivados por el deseo de mejorar su reputación internacional como socios serios en la lucha contra el yihadismo.

### Palabras clave:

Emiratos Árabes Unidos, Arabia Saudí, Qatar, monarquías del Golfo, Cuerno de África, mar Rojo.

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## Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council – primarily Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar – have strengthened economic and security ties across the Red Sea, enhancing their economic and diplomatic role in sub-Saharan African countries where they now have a major presence. Emiratis, Saudis and Qataris work in the region with the aim of building their status as an international power by acting as major brokers in the continent's affairs and conflicts.



Photo 1. Map of the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Source: [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-the-Gulf-and-the-Horn-of-Africa\\_fig1\\_324747567](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-the-Gulf-and-the-Horn-of-Africa_fig1_324747567)

Although Emiratis, Saudis and Qataris have traded with African peoples for centuries, the 2007 global financial crisis prompted them to redirect their investments towards Africa. With the slowdown in Western economies, Africa's fast-growing economies became an attractive proposition. Gulf monarchies have boosted their strategies of economic diversification and reduced oil dependence by investing in African markets, especially when oil prices plummeted in 2014. The experience of Gulf companies in the energy sector makes them particularly attractive to African states seeking to develop their own energy industries. Moreover, the capacity of these Arab countries to implement large-scale infrastructure projects is also a powerful lure for rapidly developing African states.<sup>1</sup>

The common religious heritage has also favoured closer ties. When Western economies went into crisis, some African leaders looked to the Gulf kingdoms for economic assistance, making use of their religious ties. The expansion of development aid on the continent also serves to bolster their reputation among African Muslims, while furthering their own economic interests.

As their economic interests in Africa have grown, the Emiratis, Saudis and Qataris have also expanded their security presence. In addition to supporting anti-piracy efforts in Somali waters, they have enhanced their military capabilities by building their first bases in the Horn of Africa. The trigger in this case was involvement in the war in Yemen. Yemen's location is particularly significant in the context of the new global order, in which the transit of goods and flows of people are substantial. From Yemen, maritime traffic near the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea can be controlled. It is also the Eastern steward of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. In the two sections of the strait, between Yemen's Perim Island and Djibouti, as well as between Yemen's Hanish Islands and Eritrea's coastal islands, it is less than 10 miles wide. This means that maritime traffic through the strait can easily be threatened.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> TODMAN, Will. "The Gulf Scramble for Africa", *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. November 2018. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/gulf-scramble-africa-gcc-states-foreign-policy-laboratory>

Note: all links are available as of 23 May 2023.

<sup>2</sup> CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. *Yemen: a conflict of difficult choices and impossible solutions*. IEEE Analysis Paper 44/2022. June 2022. Available at:

[https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2022/DIEEEA44\\_2022\\_JOSCAS\\_Yemen.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2022/DIEEEA44_2022_JOSCAS_Yemen.pdf)

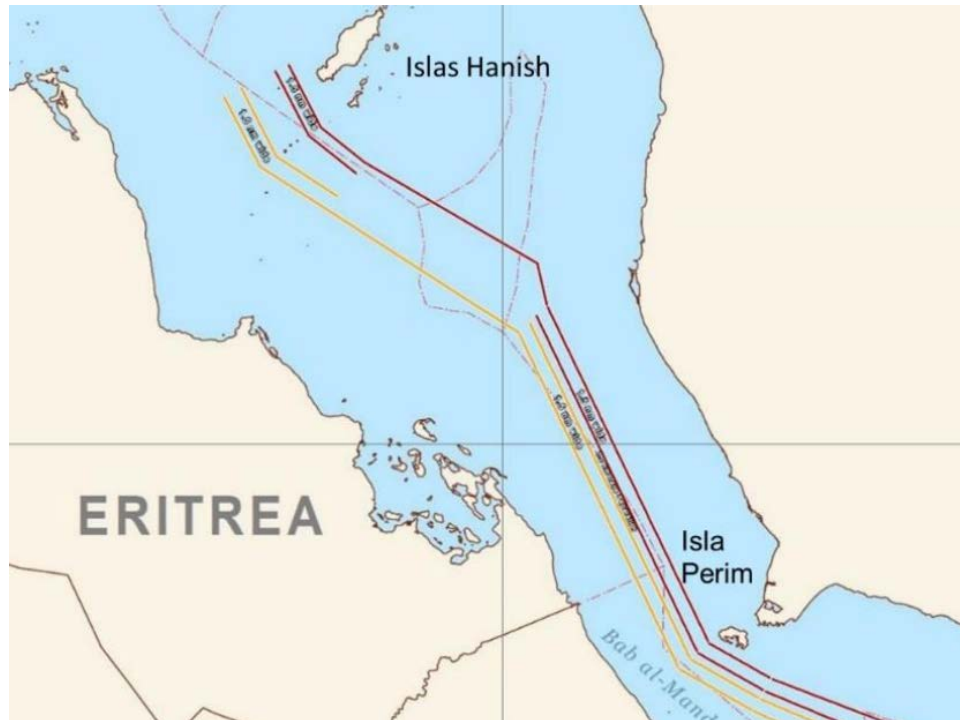


Photo 2. Ports and military bases in the Horn of Africa. Source: Location of the international transit corridor through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Source: Japan P&I Club. Gulf of Aden, Bab Al Mandeb, Southern Red Sea Guidance on Maritime Security Transit Corridor. Available at: <https://www.piclub.or.jp/en/news/13231>

The Emiratis and Saudis have also increased military cooperation with the aim of playing a leading role in international counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel. In this regard, the Islamic Military Coalition against Terrorism (IMCTC) was launched in 2016 under Saudi patronage. This platform has significantly improved military cooperation and intelligence sharing between Gulf monarchies and African states. In this context, in 2017, Saudi Arabia and the UAE contributed \$118 million and \$35.4 million, respectively, to a counter-terrorism force in the Sahel.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, Gulf countries have opened dozens of embassies in sub-Saharan Africa and intervened diplomatically in African conflicts in order to increase their international prestige. Perceptions of US withdrawal from the continent have been part of the motivation for these interventions. With Washington in retreat, Arab monarchies seem

<sup>3</sup> TODMAN, Will. "The Gulf Scramble for Africa", *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. November 2018. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/gulf-scramble-africa-gcc-states-foreign-policy-laboratory>

determined to play their own role. In the words of one Gulf official: "If we look at the future of Africa, it is clear: China is in. Arab countries are in. The United States is not."<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, the ability of these countries to reinforce peace agreements with significant economic incentives goes a long way towards explaining their successes where others have failed. A clear example is the 2018 Jeddah Peace Agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, sponsored by the Saudis and Emiratis and accompanied by investment pledges. The Gulf monarchies are taking advantage of the overlap of interests among the Horn of Africa states to skilfully benefit from their relations and assets in the region and play a role as mediators.<sup>5</sup> Some observers appreciate that diplomacy is based on the principle of peace for cash. Indeed, some argue that without money peace would have been impossible and that it is precisely in this condition that peace is so fragile. Thus, in the case of the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, it entails the economic opening up of these countries to Gulf interests with the construction of an oil pipeline between the two countries by the UAE, as well as a railway linking Ethiopia to the port of Assab.<sup>6</sup> It is also worth noting that since 2021 the Abu Dhabi emirate has been acting as mediator in the dispute between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan over riparian rights of the Nile River, although no tangible result has yet been achieved.

With regard to the conflict in Sudan that erupted on 15 April, Saudi Arabia is playing a leading diplomatic role. On 6 May, representatives of the two opposing groups met in Jeddah to negotiate. Although the talks have not resulted in a ceasefire, the Saudis are once again demonstrating their mediation skills and clout in the region. Beyond negotiations, they have also taken the lead in evacuating foreigners by sending ships. In total, they have managed to transfer around eight thousand people of various nationalities from Port Sudan to Jeddah.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa". *International Crisis Group*. November 2018. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/ united-arab-emirates/b65-united-arab-emirates-horn-africa>

<sup>5</sup> LONS, Camille. "Saudi Arabia and the UAE Look to Africa", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/77561>

<sup>6</sup> SILVA, Victoria. *The growing Gulf presence in Africa: implications for regional security*. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos. September 2019. Available at: [https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2019/DIEEE072\\_2019VICSIL\\_golfoAfrica.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2019/DIEEE072_2019VICSIL_golfoAfrica.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> CAFIERO, Giorgio. "Analysis: Saudi Arabia's diplomatic energy, soft power in Sudan". May 2023. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/15/analysis-saudi-arabias-diplomatic-energy-soft-power-in-sudan>

## United Arab Emirates

Although the Emirates, like the other Gulf monarchies, have historical relations with the Horn of Africa due to migratory flows, the will to develop a genuine African policy was initiated by the Emirate of Dubai when, after the 2008 financial crisis, it decided to reorient its international investment strategy. The emirate's momentum in sub-Saharan Africa has been such that Western companies are choosing Dubai as a regional hub from which to operate in African countries. The emirate offers attractive fiscal conditions and its flag carrier, Emirates Airlines, provides direct connections from Dubai to major African capitals. In addition, Dubai has attracted a growing number of African entrepreneurs, who have chosen the emirate as their base for investment operations. The number of African companies registered with the Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Investment has increased exponentially over the last decade. It is also worth noting that major Chinese and Indian banks have established their African hubs in Dubai.<sup>8</sup>

However, the baton for the growing Emirati presence in sub-Saharan Africa has been taken over by the emirate of Abu Dhabi, whose priorities in the region are also political and military. This evolution in the UAE's African policy is part of its overall foreign policy which, since the Arab Spring of 2011, has made combating political Islamist actors, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, one of its main objectives.<sup>9</sup> The turmoil in the Middle East – the rise of the Islamic State, the collapse of Libya, the Syrian civil war, the instability in post-coup Egypt – and the fear of what some Gulf leaders saw as Iran's growing influence across the region created a siege mentality in some Gulf kingdoms. Abu Dhabi, like Saudi Arabia, considers Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups, which also have a presence, albeit limited, within the Emirates, to be an existential threat. Their rise alarmed Emirati leaders, especially as they noted that conflicts in the Arab world seemed increasingly interlinked, with events in one country spilling over to the rest.<sup>10</sup>

The UAE has implemented what some have called its "Egyptian model" with many African countries, i.e., diplomatic, military and financial support to stable political actors who are

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<sup>8</sup> PLÁCIDO, Gustavo. "The United Arab Emirates, Africa and Angola in the new Silk Road", *Portuguese Institute of International Relations and Security*.

[https://www.academia.edu/13691974/The\\_United\\_Arab\\_Emirates\\_Africa\\_and\\_Angola\\_in\\_the\\_new\\_Silk\\_Road](https://www.academia.edu/13691974/The_United_Arab_Emirates_Africa_and_Angola_in_the_new_Silk_Road)

<sup>9</sup> SAMAN, Jean-Loup. "The United Arab Emirates in Africa", *Notes de l'Ifri*. September 2021. Available at: [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/saaman\\_eau\\_afrique\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/saaman_eau_afrique_2021.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> "The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa", *International Crisis Group*. November 2018. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/unity-arab-emirates/b65-united-arab-emirates-horn-africa>

seen as the most capable of containing Islamist movements. In addition to Egypt, it has also been active in Yemen and Sudan. In this vein, the Emiratis make their development aid and investments conditional on African authorities expressing support for their strategic orientations, i.e. adhering to their agenda against political Islam.

The UAE is the fourth largest investor in Africa globally, behind China, the United States and France, and the largest among the Gulf states.<sup>11</sup> Between 2016 and 2021, the Emiratis are estimated to have invested around \$1.2 billion in sub-Saharan Africa. On the trade front, the UAE is one of the continent's top ten importers of goods and commodities. Non-oil trade between the UAE and Africa is estimated at \$25 billion annually. Over the last fifteen years, the volume of trade in non-hydrocarbon products between the UAE and the African continent has grown by 700%.<sup>12</sup>

Emirati investments are focused on multiple fields, from telecommunications to the energy sector. For example, Etisalat (recently renamed e&), the Abu Dhabi telephone company and Vodafone's main shareholder, is present in eleven African countries. The Dubai-based Phanes Group, which specialises in solar energy development, is building photovoltaic power plants on the continent.<sup>13</sup>

In the field of mining, thanks to the rapprochement between the UAE and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), representatives of both states agreed in December 2022 to the creation of a joint Congolese-Emirati company, Primera Gold, owned 55% by the UAE and 45% by the DRC. The company's objective is to mine and export gold in the eastern part of the African country. In addition, negotiations are currently underway to extend the agreement to the exploitation of other mineral resources of highly strategic value such as coltan.<sup>14</sup>

However, it is in the area of port infrastructure that the UAE's presence on the continent stands out. Dubai Ports (DP) currently manages several of the most important port terminals in sub-Saharan Africa: Dakar (Senegal), Berbera (Somalia), Maputo

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1122389/leading-countries-for-fdi-in-africa-by-investor-country/>

<sup>12</sup> MEYER, Zhann. "The United Arab Emirates and Africa – partners in growth and job creation", *Business Day*. March 2023. Available at: <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/2023-03-02-zhann-meyer-the-united-arab-emirates-and-africa-partners-in-growth-and-job-creation/>

<sup>13</sup> SAMAAN, Jean-Loup. "The United Arab Emirates in Africa", *Notes de l'Ifri*. September 2021. Available at: [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/saaman\\_eau\\_afrique\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/saaman_eau_afrique_2021.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> LIFFRAN, O. "Abu Dhabi's grand gold and coltan designs in the DRC", *Africa Intelligence*. April 2023. Available at: <https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-africa/2023/04/06/abu-dhabi-s-grand-gold-and-coltan-designs-in-the-drc,109932235-eve>



(Mozambique) and Luanda (Angola).<sup>15</sup> In Djibouti, the Emirati operator also managed the port of Doraleh until the local government terminated the contract in 2018. DP has also won a concession for the construction of a logistics centre in Kigali (Rwanda) and its subsidiary P&O Ports has been awarded the contract for the development of the port of Bosaso, in the Somali autonomous region of Puntland. In addition, new port projects in Port Sudan and Madagascar are being negotiated with the local authorities.<sup>16</sup> Abu Dhabi Ports manages the port of Kamsar in Guinea.<sup>17</sup> The UAE has established itself as an influential maritime player and its efforts to build a global network of port infrastructures not only favour its competitiveness as a commercial maritime power, but also strengthen its military capabilities.



Photo 3. Ports and military bases in the Horn of Africa. Source: <https://eritreahub.org/international-dimensions-of-the-tigray-war-and-how-it-might-end/screenshot-2020-11-16-at-13-39-55>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.dpworld.com/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://poports.com/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.adportsgroup.com/en/about-us>

This port investment policy also underpins the food security strategy. The UAE's arid climate forces the country to rely on food imports and an estimated 90% of domestic consumption is imported. Agricultural procurement projects on African soil are seen as strategic investments, especially in the current context of the Ukrainian conflict, which is having such an impact on commodity supplies and prices. Along with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the UAE is one of the main buyers of agricultural land in sub-Saharan Africa. Abu Dhabi owns arable land in Nigeria, Namibia, Morocco and Ghana; in Sudan, Emirati investors have bought more than 400,000 hectares and Al Dahra Agriculture signed a deal in 2015 to inject \$1 billion as the first step in a \$10 billion project to develop the Al Hawad Valley.<sup>18</sup>

As with Saudi Arabia, the conflict in Yemen has made the Horn of Africa region the main strategic area in which the UAE has beefed up its presence. At the beginning of the Yemen conflict, the Emiratis were alarmed by Houthi rebel advances around the Bab El-Mandeb Strait, as it became possible that an Iranian-allied group could control this vital point for Emirati trade.<sup>19</sup> In order to secure its supply routes through the strait and as a staging point for its military deployment on the Yemeni coast, the UAE had to rely on its partners in the region. Djibouti, which had entrusted DP with the management of the port of Doraleh in 2008, was initially the natural partner for a naval and air base in the area. However, as the bilateral relationship deteriorated, culminating in DP's expulsion in 2018, Abu Dhabi then turned to the Eritrean port of Assab. Thus, an agreement was signed with the Eritrean government to allow it to station its troops in Assab and to build an airstrip for the air force. At the height of Emirati involvement in Yemen, the Assab base was used to launch operations on Aden (2015), Moukalla (2016) and Hodeida (2018).

And if we leave the shores of the Red Sea, we see that the Emiratis have also extended their presence in West Africa and the Sahel. In Senegal and Guinea, as already mentioned, they manage port infrastructures in Dakar and Kamsar; in Mali, Mauritania, Chad and Burkina Faso, they have invested in civilian and military infrastructures. In its

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<sup>18</sup> SAMAAN, Jean-Loup. "The United Arab Emirates in Africa", *Notes de l'Ifri*. September 2021. Available at: [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/saaman\\_eau\\_afrique\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/saaman_eau_afrique_2021.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> "The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa", *International Crisis Group*. November 2018. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/united-arab-emirates/b65-united-arab-emirates-horn-africa>

strategy to fight Islamist forces, the UAE has funnelled more than \$30 million into the G5 Sahel joint force. It has also established the G5 Sahel Defence College in Nouakchott and funds projects to develop the military capabilities of local armies.<sup>20</sup>

The UAE is also a major donor of development aid to Africa.

Country	Funding (\$)
Sudan	4,250,131,638
Somalia	1,213,685,768
Ethiopia	1,176,687,619
Eritrea	504,526,756
Mali	491,883,523
Mauritania	414,729,988
RDC	172,011,724
Uganda	146,854,494
Senegal	146,156,457
Tanzania	117,092,131

Table 1. Main recipient countries of Emirati development aid. Cumulative from 1975-2023.  
 Source: <https://uae-aid-fcsa.hub.arcgis.com/>

## Saudi Arabia

With the rise of Mohammed bin Salman as the country's crown prince and de facto ruler, Saudi foreign policy has been undergoing a gradual transformation. In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, until recently Saudi Arabia did not have a specific, coherent foreign policy with a long-term purpose. In the last decade, however, things have changed. But what were the reasons for this turnaround?

Against the backdrop of the war in Yemen (currently in a state of ceasefire) the Horn of Africa region has taken on a significant geostrategic importance for Saudi Arabia, as the countries in this region have become important components in managing the kingdom's security. This region has traditionally been of particular importance to Saudi Arabia because of the close cultural, linguistic and commercial ties, as well as the exchange of migratory flows. Washington's perceived withdrawal from the Middle East is causing shifts in the regional balance of power and Saudi Arabia has been forced to adopt a more coherent approach to the Horn of Africa if it is to safeguard its national interests. Unlike the UAE, Saudi Arabia is in the direct neighbourhood of the Horn of Africa. While Emirati

<sup>20</sup> SAMAAN, Jean-Loup. "The United Arab Emirates in Africa", *Notes de l'Ifri*. September 2021. Available at: [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/saaman\\_eau\\_afrique\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/saaman_eau_afrique_2021.pdf)

interventionism has comparatively lower political costs – as its own position of power can hardly be threatened given the distance that separates them – the situation is completely different for Riyadh. Any destabilisation in the Horn of Africa affects the power structure within the Saudi sphere of influence. Riyadh is therefore obliged to be more cautious and risk averse.<sup>21</sup>

Riyadh sees a nexus between Yemen and the Horn of Africa. Since the military intervention in the country began in March 2015, the region has been considered an area of strategic influence for operating in this conflict. As a result, Saudi Arabia pressured the various governments of the Horn of Africa to forge an alliance and make progress against the Houthi militia in Yemen. Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia then joined the Saudi-led military axis. Such military cooperation with African countries is often reinforced by economic incentives. Thus, Saudi Arabia deposited \$1 billion in Sudan's central bank shortly after Sudan contributed more than a thousand soldiers to the fighting in Yemen in 2015.<sup>22</sup> The priority of the Saudi's regional policy is the resolution of the conflict in Yemen, which has become an economic and security disaster for Riyadh in recent years. Recent direct talks with Iran show Saudi Arabia's political will to overcome this conflict diplomatically, as a military solution has become unlikely.



Photo 4. Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed during the signing of the Eritrea-Ethiopia peace agreement in 2018. Source: <https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/publikation/policy-brief-10-saudi-arabia-in-the-horn-of-africa>

<sup>21</sup> SONS, Sebastian. "Between Power Projection and Regional Rivalries. Saudi Arabia's Engagement in the Horn of Africa", *Megatrends Africa*. December 2022. Available at: [https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA-PB\\_Sons\\_Saudi\\_Arabia\\_HoA\\_final.pdf](https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA-PB_Sons_Saudi_Arabia_HoA_final.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> TODMAN, Will. "The Gulf Scramble for Africa", *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. November 2018. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/gulf-scramble-africa-gcc-states-foreign-policy-laboratory>

On the Arabian peninsula, irregular migration to Yemen and onward to the kingdom is also a concern for the Saudis. The activities of terrorist groups in the area, piracy in the Gulf of Aden and Bab El-Mandeb Strait, the smuggling of khat and drugs, and illegal fishing are also of concern. The Red Sea is geostrategically vital for Saudi oil trade and any instability in the region affects the kingdom's economic interests. In 2017, Saudi Arabia closed a deal to build its first overseas military base in Djibouti, with the same objective of protecting its strategic interests in the region.<sup>23</sup>

But it is not just security in military terms that has pushed the Saudis to look to the Horn of Africa. Food security is another key element that is shaping Saudi relations with its neighbours across the Red Sea. This strategy has mainly materialised through Saudi Star Agriculture Development, a company owned by Saudi-Ethiopian billionaire Mohamed Al Amoudi. The kingdom is buying up farmland in the African region to secure its own food supply. It bought 500,000 hectares of land in Tanzania in 2009, has acquired 124,000 hectares in Ethiopia and in April 2021 announced that it would support agricultural production in Sudan with \$400 million. The kingdom's current population of thirty-two million is expected to reach almost forty-five million by 2050, and this growth will inevitably translate into increased demand for food. Africa, with its vast swathes of arable land and fertile soil, may be the answer. It is estimated that Uganda alone can feed more than 200 million people, more than four and a half times its own population.<sup>24</sup> However, land purchases have been heavily criticised, as the deals in some way or another affect local food supply, increasing poverty and social injustice. In any case, supply shortages caused by the conflict in Ukraine are pushing Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf monarchies to continue their policies of buying African land to mitigate growing grain shortages.

Another vector of Saudi influence is the funds provided in the form of loans or grants by the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD). Investment projects cover a variety of sectors: roads, water supply, electronics, education and health. The SFD has invested €4.2 billion in Africa, 40% of which has gone to Egypt. Other notable beneficiary states include

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<sup>23</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>24</sup> BERMAN, Illan. "Here Comes Saudi Arabia's African Offensive", *The National Interest*. March 2020.

<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/here-comes-saudi-arabia%E2%80%99s-african-offensive-138237>

Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mauritania and Senegal.<sup>25</sup> With financial support and humanitarian aid, Saudi leaders seek to forge political alliances, present themselves as reliable guarantors of development policy support and as generous partners and donors.<sup>26</sup>

Country	Funding (\$)
Sudan	1,649,872,401
Mauritania	1,264,422,353
Senegal	805,431,257
Ethiopia	765,924,453
Djibouti	357,397,034
Somalia	328,336,406
Mali	323,792,370
Guinea	301,352,073
Niger	229,259,270
Kenya	226,250,812

Table 2. Main recipient countries of Saudi development aid. Cumulative from 1975-2023.  
Source: <https://data.ksrelief.org/>

Riyadh is also interested in creating multilateral fora. An example of this policy is the Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (Red Sea Council). It originated in January 2020 at the initiative of Saudi Arabia and includes Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia. The aim of this partnership is to improve trade and security along this waterway, which carries an estimated 13% of the world's trade.<sup>27</sup> The forum has so far failed to achieve significant results, yet it serves as a platform for the Saudis to pursue common security interests, cultivate regional loyalties and foment antipathy towards rivals such as Iran.

Finally, it should be noted that Saudi Arabia does not enjoy a dominant role as a maritime networker and is partly dependent on Emirati infrastructure. However, the kingdom has plans to invest more in the logistics sector, especially in the Horn of Africa, in order to alleviate its dependence on the UAE and also to compete with China in the region. It

<sup>25</sup> AUGÉ, Benjamin. "Diplomatic Relations between Qatar and Sub-Saharan Africa. An Evolving Affair", *Notes de l'Ifri*. August 2016. Available at: [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/notes\\_qatar\\_afrique\\_en\\_oksl.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/notes_qatar_afrique_en_oksl.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> SONS, Sebastian. "Between Power Projection and Regional Rivalries. Saudi Arabia's Engagement in the Horn of Africa", *Megatrends Africa*. December 2022. Available at: [https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA-PB\\_Sons\\_Saudi\\_Arabia\\_HoA\\_final.pdf](https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA-PB_Sons_Saudi_Arabia_HoA_final.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> BERMAN, Illan. "Here Comes Saudi Arabia's African Offensive", *The National Interest*. March 2020.

<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/here-comes-saudi-arabia%E2%80%99s-african-offensive-138237>

should not be forgotten that for Beijing the Horn of Africa is a strategic centre of the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>28</sup>

## **Qatar**

Over the past two decades, Qatar has become a major international player thanks to its position as the world's leading producer of liquefied natural gas. Its reserves, the third largest in the world after Russia and Iran,<sup>29</sup> have made its rapid economic take-off possible. But Qatar is not content with the status of an energy power and geopolitically seeks to emerge as a regional power. To achieve this, the country has used its enormous financial resources to pursue an ambitious foreign policy. Qatar is achieving its goals through four instruments: its investment fund, Qatar Investment Authority; its news channel, Al Jazeera; the opening of embassies on five continents; and the steady increase of new Qatar Airways routes. Qatar has worked to build a reputation as a reliable power by mediating in various conflicts in Africa. Thus, it has played a leading role in negotiations between Eritrea and Sudan, Chad and Sudan, and Eritrea and Djibouti. However, some of these mediation attempts have failed to achieve lasting peace due to Qatar's limited capacity to project power, lack of professional staff on the ground and, in general, its short diplomatic experience in the context of African regional dynamics.<sup>30</sup> In any case, its interest in mediation has shown that its ambition goes beyond investing petrodollars in sub-Saharan Africa. In recent years, Qatar has opened more embassies in sub-Saharan Africa than any other state, with the exception of Türkiye.

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<sup>28</sup> SONS, Sebastian. "Between Power Projection and Regional Rivalries. Saudi Arabia's Engagement in the Horn of Africa", *Megatrends Africa*. December 2022. Available at: [https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA-PB\\_Sons\\_Saudi\\_Arabia\\_HoA\\_final.pdf](https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA-PB_Sons_Saudi_Arabia_HoA_final.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/natural-gas/>

<sup>30</sup> TODMAN, Will. "The Gulf Scramble for Africa", *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. November 2018. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/gulf-scramble-africa-gcc-states-foreign-policy-laboratory>



Photo 5. The Emir of Qatar and Senegal's President Macky Sall during the Qatari leader's tour of West Africa.  
Source: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/what-qatar-doing-west-africa>

Relations between Qatar and sub-Saharan African countries, with the exception of Sudan and Eritrea, are still new and under construction. Although ties with the Maghreb countries date back to the 1970s, it was only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the country began forging closer diplomatic relations south of the desert. Currently, some 20 sub-Saharan countries have embassies in Doha. In addition to Sudan and Eritrea, two states are of particular interest to Qatar, the two largest economies in the region: South Africa and Nigeria. In the first case, Qatar Petroleum and the South African company Sasol joined forces to build a gas-to-liquids plant in Ras Laffan (Qatar's main gas hub). This interest in South African technology has substantially increased bilateral relations and helped to dispel the usual stereotypes of a technologically backward continent. In the case of Nigeria, relations with Qatar are, to some extent, much older, as both countries are members of OPEC. However, it was not until 2013 that Nigeria opened a diplomatic mission in Qatar. Although the economic reasons for this presence in Qatar were important, Nigeria was not looking to buy gas and had no liquidity problems. The main reason was political in



nature. Qatari interventionism, especially in conflict resolution in Africa, forced Nigeria, which sees itself as the great continental power, to forge closer ties with the Gulf state.<sup>31</sup>

Energy is one of the main drivers of Qatar's investments which are carried out through its company Qatar Petroleum International, founded in 2006. In sub-Saharan Africa, it has made two investments in this sector: in Mauritania and in the Republic of Congo. In addition, Qatar has also invested in power generation plants through its company Nebras Power. One of the first projects Nebras has committed itself to is in Kenya. The Qataris want to invest in a 500 MW gas-fired power plant in Mombasa through a partnership with Kenya Electricity Generating Company. Another agreement has also been signed with Senegal to build a floating gas import terminal and a 400 MW power plant near Dakar. In addition to the hydrocarbon and energy sectors, Qatar has launched an investment strategy in mining projects. It does this through Qatar Steel (iron ore production) and Qatar Mining (mineral exploration and production). In sub-Saharan Africa, Qatar Steel signed its first agreement with Mauritania's national industrial and mining company.<sup>32</sup>

In the area of food security, Qatar, like its neighbours, is highly dependent on food imports. It has invested US\$500 million in Sudan's agriculture and food sector. It also entered into talks with Kenya to lease 40,000 hectares of land in the Tana Delta, but met with fierce local opposition.<sup>33</sup>

As a provider of official development assistance, the sub-Saharan African countries that have benefited most from Qatar are Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Guinea, Mozambique, Republic of Congo, Senegal, Comoros and Djibouti<sup>34</sup>.

### **Gulf rivalries: an export to Africa**

Qatar has shown itself to be a balancer of power between the Gulf states, serving as a counterweight in the regional struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. It has also had a significant influence on the conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and recently Afghanistan. As a

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<sup>31</sup> AUGÉ, Benjamin. "Diplomatic Relations between Qatar and Sub-Saharan Africa. An Evolving Affair", *Notes de l'Ifri*. August 2016. Available at: [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/notes\\_qatar\\_afrique\\_en\\_oksl.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/notes_qatar_afrique_en_oksl.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>33</sup> TODMAN, Will. "The Gulf Scramble for Africa", *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. November 2018. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/gulf-scramble-africa-gcc-states-foreign-policy-laboratory>

<sup>34</sup> <https://qatarfund.org.qa/projects/?c=AF>

result, the Qataris have gained in esteem, while their rivals have lost prestige and credibility through a process that might be termed "soft disempowerment".<sup>35</sup>

The Qataris still have major disagreements with the Saudis and Emiratis. One of the main reasons is the Qataris' closeness to political Islam in general and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular. The Saudis and Emiratis, for their part, see this group as seeking to destabilise the established order in the region. In the countries shaken by the Arab Spring uprisings, Saudi Arabia and Qatar found themselves backing opposing or competing factions, and the UAE aligned itself with the Saudis. This is where the strategic-ideological alignment between Saudi Arabia and the UAE began to take shape. Thus, both stood as enemies of political Islam and the supposed democratisation that the popular uprisings were supposed to bring.

Seeing the scale of the uprisings, other Gulf states feared for their security and increased pressure on Qatar. Thus, in June 2017, there was a diplomatic crisis: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt and Jordan cut diplomatic relations with the Qataris, accusing them of interfering in their domestic politics and supporting terrorist groups. Border closures and restrictions on air and sea traffic caused a crisis in Qatar that even affected food supplies. The shortages led both Iran and Türkiye to support the Qataris, creating a worrying system of alliances and hostilities that led to an imbalance in the region's complicated order. Thus, Qatar began to forge a gradual rapprochement with Türkiye, one of the actors in a position to dispute Saudi Arabia's regional leadership, and with Iran, the Saudis' main enemy.<sup>36</sup>

The Gulf rivalries were also mirrored in the Horn of Africa. Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somaliland took the position of Saudi Arabia and the UAE during the 2017 diplomatic crisis, while Somalia adopted a neutral position so as not to jeopardise its good economic relations with Qatar.<sup>37</sup> A few months after the outbreak of the conflict, in December 2017, the Emir of Qatar, Tamim ibn Hamad Al Thani, toured West Africa,

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<sup>35</sup> CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. "From soft power to subtle power: The case of Qatar", Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos. October 2021.

[https://www.ieee.es/contenido/noticias/2021/10/DIEEEA38\\_2021\\_JOSCAS\\_Catar.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/contenido/noticias/2021/10/DIEEEA38_2021_JOSCAS_Catar.pdf)

<sup>36</sup> BORDÓN, Javier. *Difficult primus among these pairs: Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards Qatar*. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos. 2021. October 2021.

[https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2021/DIEEEO117\\_2021\\_JAVBOR\\_Catar.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2021/DIEEEO117_2021_JAVBOR_Catar.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> SONS, Sebastian. "Between Power Projection and Regional Rivalries. Saudi Arabia's Engagement in the Horn of Africa", *Megatrends Africa*. December 2022. Available at: [https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA-PB\\_Sons\\_Saudi\\_Arabia\\_HoA\\_final.pdf](https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA-PB_Sons_Saudi_Arabia_HoA_final.pdf)

visiting Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Mali and Senegal. This was the Qatari leader's first trip to this region of the continent and the aim was to express his gratitude to the states that did not break off or quickly re-established relations with Qatar and thus send a message of defiance to his Gulf rivals.

During the four years of the blockade, the Emiratis viewed the absence of support for their position or the choice of neutrality as African leaders siding with the Qatari position and more personally as an expression of ingratitude towards their Emirati patrons. In Somalia, the rivalry between Qatar and the UAE had a detrimental effect on relations between Mogadishu and the autonomous regions of Somaliland and Puntland. Thus, the UAE's growing economic and military presence in these regions further contributed to the internal fracture among Somali political forces.<sup>38</sup> In any case, the rapprochement between Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE in January 2021, which brought an end to the blockade and a return of diplomatic relations, has meant that African countries can now improve their relations with both sides.



Photo 6. Qatar's Emir Al Thani, Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman and UAE National Security Chief Tahnoun Bin Zayed Al Nahyan (son of the UAE's founder and first president) at a meeting on the Red Sea in September 2021, a few months after the restoration of diplomatic relations between the Gulf monarchies. Source: Twitter.

<sup>38</sup> SAMAAN, Jean-Loup. "The United Arab Emirates in Africa", *Notes de l'Ifri*. September 2021. Available at: [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/saaman\\_eau\\_afrique\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/saaman_eau_afrique_2021.pdf)

The expansion of Emirati, Saudi and Qatari interests in the Horn of Africa goes hand in hand with the export of their rivalries to a region that already has many. And they are not the only foreign powers now turning their attention to the region. China has established its first overseas military installation in Djibouti, just ten kilometres from the only US base in Africa, making the Red Sea a new arena for great power competition. At its centre is the Bab El-Mandeb Strait, the maritime corridor through which hundreds of billions of dollars in oil and other exports pass between Europe, Asia and the Gulf. The Red Sea is becoming a theatre of geopolitical intrigue. On its shores a range of state actors – with different cultures, different models of governance and different styles of diplomacy – are feeling each other out. Opportunities and risks abound and, as in any emerging frontier, the rules of the game are still being written.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusions

Emiratis, Saudis and Qataris have crossed the Red Sea and entered sub-Saharan Africa to stay. They have consolidated their presence on the continent, which has taken a qualitative leap forward over the last fifteen years. The Gulf monarchies consider control over the security and navigation of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden as the safeguard to their internal stability, commercial interests and food security, and this dominance is only possible with a foothold on both shores.

Arab states in some ways see sub-Saharan Africa as a laboratory in which to test out interventions that further their objectives on the international stage. In this sense, they perceive their status as regional powers to be largely at stake on the African continent, and the rivalries and struggle for regional power in the Middle East have been transferred to this theatre.

In recent years, Gulf states have opened dozens of embassies in sub-Saharan Africa and intervened diplomatically in African conflicts in order to increase their international prestige. The Saudis and Emiratis are also seeking to play a leading role in the fight

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<sup>39</sup> VERTIN, Zach. "Red Sea rivalries: The Gulf, the Horn of Africa & the new geopolitics of the Red Sea", *Foreign Affairs*. January 2019. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-africa/2019-01-15/red-sea-rivalries>

against terrorism in West Africa, motivated by a desire to enhance their international reputation as serious partners in the fight against jihadism.

This growing presence in sub-Saharan Africa is already bringing benefits such as increased trade and investment in the region, the building out of infrastructure and the establishment of peace agreements between enemies. However, client relationships are also developing which, as was seen especially during the 2017 diplomatic crisis, push African states to choose a side and suffer the consequences of that choice.

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