

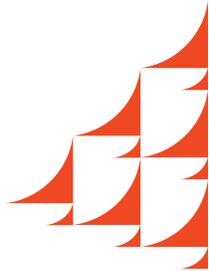


# The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington

Building bridges of understanding



UAE Security Forum 2019  
Reshaping the Future of the Horn of Africa  
Conference Report



The Arab Gulf States  
Institute in Washington  
Building bridges of understanding

## UAE Security Forum 2019 Reshaping the Future of the Horn of Africa

Conference Report

February 12, 2020

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The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), launched in 2015, is an independent, nonprofit institution dedicated to providing expert research and analysis of the social, economic, and political dimensions of the Gulf Arab states and key neighboring countries and how they affect domestic and foreign policy. AGSIW focuses on issues ranging from politics and security to economics, trade, and business; from social dynamics to civil society and culture. Through programs, publications, and scholarly exchanges the institute seeks to encourage thoughtful debate and inform the U.S. foreign-policy, business, and academic communities regarding this critical geostrategic region.

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## About This Report

This report is based on the presentations and discussions during the UAE Security Forum 2019, "Reshaping the Future of the Horn of Africa," held on December 12, 2019 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

This report was prepared by Amélie Mouton, a journalist based in Abu Dhabi and the regional correspondent for the Belgian newspaper La Libre Belgique.

For more information and videos from the forum, visit [www.uaesf.org](http://www.uaesf.org).

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## Foreword

On behalf of the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington's board of directors and staff, it gives me great pleasure to present to you the final report of UAE Security Forum 2019, "Reshaping the Future of the Horn of Africa." The forum was held at NYU Abu Dhabi on December 12, 2019.

As the fourth iteration of this forum, UAESF 2019 further demonstrated the vital role the forum plays as a venue where U.S., Emirati, and regional partners gather to find creative solutions to some of their most pressing, common challenges.

As the prominence of the Gulf Arab states has grown on the global stage, their influence has expanded across the broader Middle East and beyond. Nowhere is this presence more significant and complex than in the Horn of Africa. Given the proximity of Arabia to the Horn of Africa across the narrow Red Sea, the two regions have age-old relations. In recent years, the influence of Gulf states has significantly increased as they build strategic relationships in the region, driven by economic motivations as well as security concerns.

To help us analyze the long-term implications of the changing dynamics in the Horn of Africa and the renewed international interest in the region, we were pleased to have at the forum senior leaders from the African Union, European Union, United States, and United Arab Emirates as well as experts from the region. You will find their insightful comments on strategic objectives and priorities in the pages of this report.

I would like to thank our partners, Lockheed Martin Global, Inc., the U.S.-U.A.E. Business Council, AmCham Abu Dhabi, AmCham Dubai, and The National newspaper. I hope you find this report informative and useful, and I look forward to the next iteration of the UAE Security Forum in 2020.



Ambassador Douglas A. Silliman  
*President, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*



Ambassador Douglas A. Silliman, President, AGSIW

## Executive Summary

On December 12, 2019, the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington held its fourth UAE Security Forum, “Reshaping the Future of the Horn of Africa.” Convened in Abu Dhabi, the forum brought together a diverse group of policymakers, officials, researchers, and representatives from nongovernmental organizations to analyze the long-term implications of the renewed international interest in the Horn of Africa. In particular, discussions focused on the growing influence of Gulf countries as they build strategic relationships in a region of critical importance.

Over the past decade, the Horn of Africa’s strategic location and promising signs of economic development have attracted the attention of Gulf Arab states and other foreign powers like China, the United States, and Turkey. Maintaining security in the Bab el-Mandeb strait, at the mouth of the Red Sea, is imperative to ensuring freedom of navigation in a vital shipping lane for international trade and preventing attacks and disruptions to the regional and global economy. Grasping the political and economic significance of the Horn of Africa, international and regional players are investing in agriculture and port infrastructure, while increasing their military presence and diplomatic outreach.

The competition for influence raises risks in a fragmented region that is struggling with weak institutional capacity, insecurity, massive population displacement, and poverty. Ethiopia and Sudan, two key countries for the Horn of Africa’s stability, are going through political transitions that make them particularly vulnerable to outside interference. Somalia is still facing deep instability and serves as a cautionary tale on how external rivalries can negatively impact fragile states. However, deepening foreign engagement in the region can create opportunities for increased economic and political cooperation, as the recent formation of a Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden illustrates. On January 6, foreign ministers from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia, Egypt, and Yemen met in Riyadh to sign a charter that establishes the foundations of a sustained regional dialogue about investment strategies, foreign interference, and security in vital commercial waterways.

Speakers and discussants at the UAE Security Forum mentioned this initiative as a promising path toward mutually beneficial relationships and a common vision of prosperity and stability around the Red Sea. They also highlighted the potential of big infrastructure projects, such as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Discussions emphasized meaningful ways to support Ethiopia’s and Sudan’s transitions, suggesting rapid measures to improve the economy in both countries and address the specific demands of an emerging generation. Participants concurred about the need to coordinate stabilization efforts in Somalia and avoid conflicting interests, even more so given the parliamentary elections expected in 2020, which would be the first to be held with popular participation since 1969. Finally, several participants pleaded for the creation of a new multilateral system in the region that would build on the successful international anti-piracy campaign off the coast of Somalia.

## Key Findings and Recommendations

- Regional and international players have increased their engagement in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa in the past decade. Driven by economic opportunities and security concerns, this engagement by external powers presents both challenges and opportunities in a region that is struggling with state fragmentation, insecurity, massive population displacement, and poverty.
- Ongoing transitions in Ethiopia and Sudan will deeply reshape the geopolitics of the Horn of Africa. These transitions make these key countries particularly vulnerable to outside interference. External players must have a deep appreciation of the complexity of each situation and engage carefully and constructively to avoid destabilizing the region.
- Removing Sudan from the United States' list of state sponsors of terrorism and engaging it in a debt relief program are just a start to support for a sustained, democratic transition in that country. The international community should also look for more creative measures, such as fostering confidence among banks and businesses to invest in Sudan.
- Somalia continues to face deep instability, and Somali leaders should look for internal solutions. Talks should not be limited to the government in Mogadishu and the federal member states but should include al-Shabab.
- Somalia serves as a cautionary tale on how external rivalries can negatively impact fragile states. The country is scheduled to have its first popular parliamentary elections since 1969 in 2020. Gulf countries should be cautious not to turn the suffrage into "a bidding war" among themselves by injecting large sums of money into the process.
- Efforts to increase regional integration and economic cooperation within the Horn of Africa itself, and with Gulf countries, should be advanced. Big infrastructure projects, such as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, could play a positive role, if broad regional consensus is reached on such projects. The recent establishment of a Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden is also a promising step in the direction of further interregional dialogue.
- Regional and global powers should cooperate rather than compete in the region. The successful anti-piracy campaign off the coast of Somalia could serve as a model for a multilateral architecture.
- Political leaders from the Horn of Africa and external actors should acknowledge the depth of transformation that is sweeping across the region. Changes are driven by a better-educated, politically aware, and connected generation that is demanding government accountability and a healthy state-society relationship. Supporting this emerging generation with economic opportunities and increased political participation should be the focus of Gulf long-term engagement.



## Introduction

*The Gulf countries' priorities are to ensure freedom of navigation in a vital shipping lane for international trade, while preventing attacks and disruptions to the regional and global economy.*

Economic and political interaction among people from the Arabian Peninsula and Horn of Africa have a very long history. At the junction of the two regions, the Red Sea, at no point wider than 220 miles, has always served as a bridge between Arabia and Africa. Trade in grain, livestock, lumber, salt, coffee, and frankincense began more than 2,000 years ago across this maritime corridor. The advent of Islam further increased connections, starting when the followers of the Prophet Muhammad fled persecution in Mecca and sought refuge in the Kingdom of Aksum, in the Ethiopian highlands. Today, the Arabic language, spoken in Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan, symbolizes the living legacy of deep cultural affinities forged across centuries.

In recent years, Gulf Arab states' influence in the Horn of Africa has significantly increased, driven by economic motivations as well as security concerns, including the war in Yemen, terrorist activities, migration, and new trade opportunities. In particular, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have become major economic and political actors, alongside big players like China and the United States. Grasping the geopolitical significance and economic potential of this region, they are investing in agriculture and port infrastructure and increasing their military presence. The Bab el-Mandeb strait, at the mouth of the Red Sea, has become an important focus. The Gulf countries' priorities are to ensure freedom of navigation in a vital shipping lane for international trade, while preventing attacks and disruptions to the regional and global economy.

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*Food insecurity, access to water, natural disasters, climate change, violent conflict, and terrorism are leading to forced displacement and instability.*

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The growing interest of the Gulf states in fostering stability in the Horn of Africa is reflected in their new roles as diplomatic brokers in Ethiopia and Sudan. These two countries are undergoing political transitions that could dramatically alter geopolitical configurations in the region. In both countries, a more educated, politically aware, and connected younger generation is at the forefront of the political process and will play a crucial role in defining the future of the region.

The challenges are numerous. Massive movements of populations continue to destabilize the region. A report by the U.N. Refugee Agency, UNHCR, had estimated that the Horn of Africa would host 4.6 million refugees and asylum seekers in 2019, mostly from South Sudan and Somalia, as well as 9.5 million people who are internally displaced in South Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> Food insecurity, access to water, natural disasters, climate change, violent conflict, and terrorism are leading to forced displacement and instability. Yet, recent unprecedented transformations have the potential to create a more positive future for one

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<sup>1</sup> "2019 Planning Summary: Subregion: East and Horn of Africa," UNHCR, May 6, 2019.

of the world's most conflict-prone regions. The Horn of Africa is in dire need of capital and transportation infrastructure that could match Gulf states' interests.

States in the Horn of Africa are not mere spectators to these developments. They are using the growing interest in the region to advance their own agendas. Yet, their deepening ties with the Gulf states present risks, as well as opportunities. The negative impact of the rift between Qatar and other Gulf countries on Somali political dynamics has served as a cautionary tale. Competition for power and profits also relates to other players like China and the United States, whose trade war is affecting regional dynamics. African states on the Red Sea coast must find a way to harness a surge of new investment without surrendering their sovereignty and being drawn into political rivalries.

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## A Strategic Partnership in a Turbulent International Order

*“Sudan’s and Ethiopia’s recent achievements demonstrate that we ought to be more ambitious in finding new ways to lend support to diplomatic processes and initiatives that promise to deliver hope.” – Anwar Gargash, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, United Arab Emirates*

Gulf states have invested more than \$13 billion in the Horn of Africa since 2000,<sup>2</sup> with Sudan and Ethiopia as the main recipients. Secure access to African markets and stable sources of food are among the pull factors that have drawn Gulf countries to the region, according to Abdullah bin Khalid Al-Saud, director of research at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. He said that these countries rushed to buy farmland, especially in Sudan and Ethiopia, as a hedge against food insecurity in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. Gulf countries are also interested in positioning themselves in a fast-changing region that will be a key link in China’s Belt and Road Initiative. The UAE has been particularly assertive on this front.

In 2000, the Dubai-based company DP World and the Djibouti government established a joint venture to operate the Doraleh Container Terminal.<sup>3</sup> The government of Djibouti seized control of the port in 2018 and a legal battle is currently taking place. In 2016, DP World also finalized an agreement with the semiautonomous region of Somaliland to develop a \$442 million commercial port in Berbera.<sup>4</sup> DP World’s expanding portfolio in the region has drawn a lot of attention, according to Anwar Gargash, minister of state for foreign affairs of the UAE.

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<sup>2</sup> Jos Meester, Willem van den Berg, and Harry Verhoeven, “Riyal Politik: The Political Economy of Gulf Investments in the Horn,” *Clingendael*, April 2018.

<sup>3</sup> “Doraleh – Djibouti,” DP World, accessed January 20, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> “Berbera – Somaliland,” DP World, accessed January 20, 2020.

But analysts should not look at this development through the lens of political ambition. The UAE is responding to global competition by specializing in business and logistics, which have always been “at the heart of our success story,” Gargash insisted.

Security concerns also figure highly on the agenda. The Red Sea is a strategic route for oil and natural gas shipments. In 2018, an estimated 6.2 million barrels of crude oil, condensate, and refined petroleum products flowed through the Bab el-Mandeb strait.<sup>5</sup> Uncertainty around the current international order and signs of a U.S. retrenchment from the region have pushed the Gulf countries to play a more proactive role in maritime security in this strategic waterway. In 2015, the UAE laid the groundwork for a military outpost in Assab, Eritrea. Qatar has also pursued ports and naval outposts in Sudan and Somalia, sometimes working in concert with Turkey, whose footprint in the region is expanding. Building on historic ties dating back to the Ottoman Empire, Ankara has established a \$50 million military base in Somalia,<sup>6</sup> while working closely on establishing a port on the island of Suakin in Sudan.



Anwar Gargash, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs,  
United Arab Emirates

While Saudi Arabia is trying to diversify its economy by implementing its Vision 2030 reform agenda, stability on the other side of the Red Sea is essential. The kingdom would like to transform its nearly 1,100-mile coastline on the Red Sea into a tourist hotspot, with megaprojects like the futuristic city Neom or the luxury resort of Amalaa. What happens across the coast can potentially affect Saudi Arabia's tourist drive. Abdullah Al-Saud mentioned considerations including environmental concerns as well as the threat of extremist groups, such as al-Shabab, al-Qaeda, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, and “the negative interferences of the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels.”

Illegal immigration also explains Gulf countries' increased attention to the Horn of Africa. Thousands of migrants have crossed the Red Sea to seek a better future in Gulf Arab countries, often traveling through war-torn Yemen. Abdullah Al-Saud argued that “at a time when Saudi is grappling with its own unemployment issue, and trying to reform its economy with Vision 2030, it makes it even more imperative to engage positively with countries [of the Horn of Africa] to amplify economic opportunities.”

It therefore comes as no surprise that Gulf countries seek to act as diplomatic brokers in the region. In 2018, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi worked closely with the United States and the African Union to end the 20-year war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. In Sudan, both countries have offered active support to the government transition, aiming to prevent the establishment of a fragile or destabilizing regime. According to Gargash, “Sudan's and Ethiopia's recent

<sup>5</sup> “The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a Strategic Route for Oil and Natural Gas Shipments,” *U.S. Energy Information Administration*, August 27, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Abdirahman Hussein and Orhan Coskun, “Turkey Opens Military Base in Mogadishu to Train Somali Soldiers,” *Reuters*, September 30, 2017.

achievements demonstrate that we ought to be more ambitious in finding new ways to lend support to diplomatic processes and initiatives that promise to deliver hope.”

Yet, while the region needs political attention, regional and international powers should engage carefully. With a combined population of 150 million people, Ethiopia and Sudan are key to the stability of the Horn of Africa. Both countries are going through profound transitions with uncertain outcomes, although it is clear they will deeply reshape the geopolitics of the region. Exercising caution is even more relevant considering that all the countries of the Horn of Africa except Eritrea will hold elections in the coming months.

## Supporting the Ethiopian and Sudanese Transitions

*“If Ethiopia goes wrong, it is like a dam bursting.” – Ambassador Alexander Rondos, EU Special Representative for the Horn of Africa*

Since his nomination as prime minister in April 2018, Abiy Ahmed, who was recently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, has chartered a new direction for Ethiopia. His foreign and domestic security policy seeks to reinforce democracy and bring economic and social changes to minimize poverty, in the words of Brigadier General Miguel Castellanos, the deputy director for operations at the U.S. Africa Command. Ethiopia is the fastest growing economy in sub-Saharan Africa. The Ethiopian government expects the economy to grow 9.2% during the 2019-20 fiscal year.<sup>7</sup> The peace settlement with Eritrea cleared a path out of isolation, providing the landlocked country with new access to the sea.

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*With a combined population of 150 million people, Ethiopia and Sudan are key to the stability of the Horn of Africa.*

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Despite the impressive growth rates, the road ahead is still very difficult. Are job creation and investments equally distributed across the country? Or do they risk exacerbating the existing cleavages? External players should have a deep appreciation of the complexity of the situation, Susan Stigant, director of Africa Programs at the United States Institute of Peace, argued. She highlighted the unsettled political environment and the “concerning level of violence and displacement” in Ethiopia. With the upcoming 2020 elections, the stakes are high for the country. Ambassador Alexander Rondos, European Union special representative for the Horn of Africa asserted, “If Ethiopia goes wrong, it is like a dam bursting.”

In Sudan, months of peaceful street demonstrations led to a coup in April 2019 that deposed President Omar al-Bashir after 30 years in power. Four months later, the Sovereign Council of Sudan, a joint military-civilian ruling body, was established to run the country for three years. “In Sudan, I believe a profound societal event has taken place ... monumental to the extent that in the annals of African, Horn of Africa, history, it will go down as one of the most pivotal ...” predicted Abdul Mohammed, chief of staff and senior political advisor of the African Union High Level Implementation Panel for Sudan and South Sudan. Yet, he added, the situation remains precarious. The establishment is not totally defeated. The new Sudanese authorities need support to overcome a system whose first aim was keeping Bashir in power.

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<sup>7</sup> “Ethiopia Eyes 9.2% Economic Growth for 2019-20,” Embassy of Ethiopia in Brussels, July 2, 2019.

Moreover, the economy is struggling. Sudan's debt has hit \$60 billion. Even if the country has committed to structural reforms with the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and African Development Bank, debt relief will be difficult to achieve as long as 60% of the budget remains allocated to security, Rondos anticipated.

The international community has tried to support Sudan's transition with the removal of the country from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism. Speakers underlined the need to look for more creative measures of support. Stigant suggested that the international community could help foster confidence among banks and businesses to invest in Sudan. Considering the case of Iraq, she suggested that while lifting sanctions is essential, it shouldn't be a stumbling block. Rondos expressed a similar position, noting that Sudan, like Ethiopia and Somalia, needs to find "the fiscal space to finance and cushion the impact of the reforms." He said that the UAE and Saudi Arabia had been very quick to provide financial help, giving Sudan the required "oxygen" to proceed with the first steps of transition.



Brigadier General Miguel Castellanos, Deputy Director for Operations, U.S. Africa Command

The Sudanese population has reacted with mixed feelings to the Saudi and Emirati support, Murithi Mutiga, project director for the Horn of Africa for the International Crisis Group, indicated. During the protest, there was a perception that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi considered that stability could only come from "a strong man" closely aligned to them. Mutiga stressed the need to clarify the long-term goals. "That transition will really test how [these] relations potentially can be a model or not." However, Abdullah Al-Saud said that Saudi Arabia does not favor a specific political system in Sudan. He explained that "What matters is that that country does not descend into chaos. There has to be a strong central government there."

More generally, speakers argued that foreign countries should consider the depth of the transformation that is sweeping across a region where youth make up a majority of the population.<sup>8</sup> The changes are driven by a better-educated, politically aware, and connected generation that is demanding government accountability and a healthy state-society relationship. Finding ways to support young entrepreneurs and providing quick access to credit could be solutions. There is also a need to rejuvenate the leadership on a continent where the median age is 19 and the average age of leaders is 62, according to Mutiga.

<sup>8</sup> In Somalia, for instance, 70% of the population is under the age of 30. "Thematic Briefing of the United Nations Country Team Somalia – Youth," *United Nations Development Programme*, accessed January 20, 2020.

## Stabilizing Somalia

*Gulf countries should be cautious not to turn the elections into “a bidding war” among themselves. – Murithi Mutiga, Project Director, Horn of Africa, International Crisis Group*

In Somalia, al-Shabab continues undermining security, which has resulted in massive population displacement. In October 2017, al-Shabab organized one of the deadliest attacks on the African continent with a truck bombing that killed over 700 people in Mogadishu. Furthermore, Somalia is also struggling to form a functioning government with federal member states vying for autonomy. And facing increasingly frequent droughts, the country's weak institutions offer little in the way of working solutions to food insecurity and devastation to agriculture and livestock.

Stabilizing Somalia is a major concern for the U.S. government, Castellanos emphasized. The focus is on “building Somali national security forces that are capable of providing security” for the people of Somalia. Such a force could stop the progression of al-Shabab and allow the political authorities to fully conduct their duties to the population. Using a comprehensive approach, the United States works closely with partners in the international community, including the EU and African Union Mission in Somalia.

External actors have a history of intervening in Somalia. The UAE has been a financial supporter of Somalia since the civil war of the 1990s. Together with Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the UAE was among the “S6” group of donors to Somalia’s security sector that was formed in 2016. Abu Dhabi has cultivated bilateral security and economic ties with semiautonomous regions. It trained the Puntland Maritime Police Force at the Bosaso naval base. In Somaliland, DP World established a joint venture to manage the Port of Berbera.

Even if the UAE recognizes Mogadishu as the country’s capital and maintains a one-Somalia policy, its relations with semiautonomous regions have angered the government of President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, known as Farmajo. Tensions have increased as regional dynamics have grown more complicated. The rift between Qatar – another key supporter of Somalia that is notably involved in the Hobyo port development – and other Gulf countries reverberates within Somali domestic and clan politics. With parliamentary elections expected in 2020, the first to be held with popular participation since 1969, there is a risk that antagonisms between different Gulf countries will have a destructive impact on local dynamics. As Mutiga argued, Gulf countries should be cautious not to turn the elections into “a bidding war” among themselves.



Murithi Mutiga, Project Director, Horn of Africa,  
International Crisis Group

Speakers stressed that an internal dialogue among Somali political actors will also be necessary to solve the crisis. While this is still a point of contention among international actors, Mutiga, as well as Rondos, highlighted the importance of including al-Shabab in peace talks along with the government in Mogadishu and the federal member states. Mutiga noted that al-Shabab, while committing terrible atrocities, has become a movement with “clear political goals.”

## Toward More Regional Integration

*Special envoys have been appointed in all countries of the Horn of Africa, and consultations are taking place around the drafting of a proposal to the Arab world that would make the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden a shared space.*

Several speakers made the case for more regional integration and economic cooperation between the countries of the Horn of Africa. Referring to the early stages of European integration, they suggested that “the coal and steel” of the region could be found in economic sectors such as oil and gas, hydropower, and ports. Gargash pointed to the urgency of strengthening infrastructure and transportation networks throughout the region.

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is a good example of a project with the potential to increase regional integration. When completed, the dam will be Africa’s biggest hydroelectric power plant. With a capacity of 6.45 gigawatts, it will create a huge supply of energy in a country where 60% of the population doesn’t have

access to electricity. Ethiopia will be able to sell the surplus power to neighboring countries. “It is a project that [has] a ripple effect on development issues,” said Abdul Mohammed. Neighboring countries could greatly benefit from the dam and the “agricultural revolution” it could trigger. Yet, Mohammed argued, the “historical suspicion” between Egypt and Ethiopia has to be handled if the dam is to become a “symbol of cooperation and development.”

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The construction of the dam has created anxieties in Egypt, where the government worries about potential water scarcity. The dam could indeed reduce the amount of Nile water flowing downstream, and Egypt and Ethiopia are currently struggling to agree on the rate at which the dam should be filled. Gulf countries, which have good relations with both countries, could build on the diplomatic success of the Ethiopian and Eritrean peace treaty to help reduce tensions, especially since the Gulf Cooperation Council Interconnection Agency, the grid operator of the Gulf countries, is eyeing the dam as a way to cut reliance on oil and gas. A multilateral framework to manage the river and its resources is urgently needed.

Abdul Mohammed reviewed the African Union and the Horn of Africa’s Intergovernmental Authority on Development’s efforts to overcome fragmentation in the region. Special envoys have been appointed in all countries of the Horn of Africa, and consultations are taking place around the drafting of a proposal to the Arab world that would make the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden a shared space. The same consultation is expected to take place in the Gulf states in

2020.

Saudi Arabia has also led several initiatives to increase cooperation between both shores. In December 2018, the joint military drill Red Wave 1 was organized among Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Egypt, Yemen, Djibouti, and an observer from Somalia. Signaling the importance of Africa in its foreign affairs, in early 2018 Saudi Arabia appointed a minister of state for African affairs. But the most promising project to promote interregional dialogue is the Council of Arab and African states. On January 6, foreign ministers from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Djibouti, Sudan, Somalia, Egypt, Eritrea, and Yemen met in Riyadh to sign a charter that lays the groundwork for further cooperation and economic integration across the Red Sea.<sup>9</sup> The council is expected to ensure maritime security, mitigate conflicts, and create an environment for advancing new economic opportunities. Controversial discussions, however, have revolved around the lack of inclusion of Ethiopia and the UAE. While essential players in the region, they are not littoral states on the Red Sea or Gulf of Aden.



Abdul Mohammed, Chief of Staff and Senior Political Advisor, African Union High Level Implementation Panel for Sudan and South Sudan

## Great Powers: Competition to Cooperation

*While regional integration is key to addressing the many challenges related to relations between the Horn of Africa and its Arab partners, there is also a need for other international players to cooperate rather than compete in the region.*

Djibouti, Castellanos underlined, remains militarily congested, with foreign forces from the United States, France, Germany, Japan, and China maintaining bases and competing for access and airspace. While regional integration is key to addressing the many challenges related to relations between the Horn of Africa and its Arab partners, there is also a need for other international players to cooperate rather than compete in the region.

China is the main player today in the Horn of Africa, according to Abdul Mohammed, who pointed to massive investments in infrastructure. To protect its growing economic interests, Beijing has increased its military footprint and opened its first overseas base in Djibouti in 2017, a move that deeply alarmed Washington. A trade war between the United States and China is affecting not only the Horn of Africa, but also the Gulf countries, Abdullah Al-Saud highlighted.

Tom Kelly, former U.S. ambassador to Djibouti, reviewed various efforts made by the United

<sup>9</sup> "UAE Welcomes Establishment of Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden," United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, January 6, 2020.

States to engage with China in the region, because of a perceived shared interest in addressing regional conflicts. The United States tried to allow China greater participation in peacekeeping operations and areas like demining. A U.S. delegation traveled to Beijing but came back with no positive outcomes. Kelly mentioned that the existing channel of communication between U.S. and Chinese military commanders in Djibouti is a positive development, but he suggested that a lot more could be done. Mutiga said that cooperation was unlikely, especially in the short term. He mentioned an open competition in Kenya and Ethiopia. In Sudan, he said that the United States and China missed an opportunity to work together on reviving the economy, especially since China owns about one-fifth of Sudan's \$60 billion-dollar debt. But there is no cooperation at the United Nations,

he indicated, and China has resisted the mildest critical statements at the Security Council.

The case for cooperation is clear, however. External players should focus on how they can help the people of the Horn of

Africa meet their aspirations and not get distracted by competition among themselves, Stigant argued. The successful anti-piracy campaign off the coast of Somalia could serve as a model for a multilateral architecture. It was the broadest naval coalition ever assembled, involving 80 countries from Europe, North America, the Gulf, and Africa as well as India, China, and Russia. The success of the campaign went beyond the broad military participation, relying also on government coordination and private sector participation.

*On January 6, foreign ministers from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Djibouti, Sudan, Somalia, Egypt, Eritrea, and Yemen met in Riyadh to sign a charter that lays the groundwork for further cooperation and economic integration across the Red Sea.*

## Conclusion

*Today, there is no clear hegemon in the Horn of Africa, and the power vacuum could create a huge mismatch between African states and the wealthier countries engaged in the region.*

In the past decade, there has been increased engagement of regional and international players in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa, driven by economic motivations and security concerns. The Red Sea basin is at the heart of a global geostrategic competition among China, the United States, and Turkey. Gulf countries have also emerged as active players, forging military partnerships, political alliances, and business deals in a region poised for strong economic growth over the next generation. But, this engagement from outside powers presents both challenges and opportunities.

Today, there is no clear hegemon in the Horn of Africa, and the power vacuum could create a huge mismatch between African states and the wealthier countries engaged in the region. Could Ethiopia reshape the game and become a leading power in the Horn of Africa? Addis-Ababa has always been reluctant to take on a leadership role, despite its population size and promising economy. And the profound transition the country is undergoing demands focusing on internal affairs. Yet, if the political tensions with Egypt are properly managed, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam could lay the foundation for greater Ethiopian influence in the region. This mega-infrastructure project could foster connections not only with neighboring

countries, but also with Gulf states, which are seeking to cut reliance on oil and gas.

The case for deepening regional cooperation between both shores of the Red Sea is clear. Today, business elites of the Horn of Africa already favor Dubai for their meetings, building networks that portend greater regional integration. The establishment of the Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden is a promising step in the direction of further interregional dialogue. The platform set its priorities on maritime security, conflict mitigation, and business relationships. Will Ethiopia and the UAE eventually be included in the initiative? Despite not being directly connected to the Red Sea, they play a prominent role in the region.



Susan Stigant, Director of Africa Programs,  
United States Institute of Peace

Other foreign powers could also find grounds for more positive engagement in the region in the near future. They could collaborate and build on the successful anti-piracy campaign off the coast of Somalia that brought together a broad coalition of countries from Europe, Africa, North America, and Asia. Multilateralism on all levels is the most valid response to deal with the flurry of often competing interests currently sweeping through the Horn of Africa.

# Agenda

December 12, 2019

## Welcome Remarks

Ambassador Douglas A. Silliman, President, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington

## Introductory Remarks

Ambassador John Rakolta Jr., U.S. Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates

## Morning Keynote

Brigadier General Miguel Castellanos, Deputy Director for Operations, U.S. Africa Command

## Session I – Growing Global and Regional Competition in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea

Deepening Gulf Arab engagement in the Horn of Africa is shaped by calculations regarding the region's strategic location and economic potential on the part of global and regional powers. This competition for influence raises risks of new conflict but also gives greater leverage to Horn of Africa leaders to bargain for better deals or play patrons off one another.

What conflicting interests are at play in the Horn of Africa, and East Africa more broadly, and how have political and military actors in the region seized on these rivalries to advance their own goals? What can regional leaders do to minimize the negative impact of external rivalries and strengthen intra-African relationships? What are the prospects for regional forums through which concerned states might come together to discuss shared interests, identify emerging threats, and create solutions?

### **Moderator:**

Mina Al-Oraibi, Editor in Chief, The National

### **Speakers:**

Abdul Mohammed, Chief of Staff and Senior Political Advisor, African Union High Level Implementation Panel for Sudan and South Sudan

Ambassador Alexander Rondos, EU Special Representative for the Horn of Africa

Susan Stigant, Director of Africa Programs, United States Institute of Peace

## Keynote Session

H.E. Anwar Gargash, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, United Arab Emirates

## Session II – Gulf-Horn Ties: The Road Ahead

Across the Horn of Africa evidence is mounting that Gulf Arab countries see the region as critically important to their long-term national interests. The Gulf countries' economic engagement with the Horn of Africa has expanded to include military partnerships and political alliances.

As the region is poised for strong economic growth over the next generation, how can Gulf capital help develop much-needed seaport, rail, and pipeline infrastructure? How can the countries of the Horn of Africa, and East Africa more broadly, leverage competing interests to their advantage and achieve economic growth? Can Gulf Arab countries successfully compete for influence in the region as larger global powers, especially China, jockey for position? Will this resurgent interest incentivize political cooperation and greater economic integration across the emerging Red Sea arena?

### **Moderator:**

Hussein Ibish, Senior Resident Scholar, AGSIW

### **Speakers:**

Ambassador Tom Kelly, Vice President for Policy and Advocacy, Raytheon International;  
Former U.S. Ambassador to Djibouti

Murithi Mutiga, Project Director, Horn of Africa, International Crisis Group

Abdullah Al-Saud, Director of Research and Head of the Security Studies Research Unit,  
King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies

## UAESF 2019 in Pictures



*(Clockwise from top left) UAE Security Forum guests; Abdullah Al-Saud, center, meets with UAESF attendees; Members of the audience; Brigadier General Miguel Castellanos, left, and Ambassador Douglas A. Silliman; Mina Al-Oraibi, left, and Ambassador Alexander Rondos during Session I; Guests register for the UAE Security Forum*

## UAESF 2019 in Pictures



*(Clockwise from top left) Murithi Mutiga during Session II; Anwar Gargash, left, and Ambassador Douglas A. Silliman during the question and answer portion of the keynote address; Mina Al-Oraibi moderates Session I; (from left) Hussein Ibish, Murithi Mutiga, Ambassador Tom Kelly, and Abdullah Al-Saud during Session II; Ambassador John Rakolta Jr. provides introductory remarks*

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