Saudi Arabia and UAE in the Horn of Africa

Containing Security Threats from Regional Rivals

ABSTRACT  This article explains the active policies adopted by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) towards the Horn of Africa, which could be attributed to the existence of rival regional powers, especially Iran and Turkey, and their adoption of policies deemed threatening to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. It uses “alliance politics” to explain how both countries are containing regional threats by building alliances with countries in the Horn of Africa by promoting military and trade relations and boosting development.

KEYWORDS: Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran, Turkey, Horn of Africa, alliance building, regional conflict

INTRODUCTION

Competition and rivalry in the Horn of Africa (HoA) have recently shifted from international players to regional actors. One of the manifest trends of this shift is the emergence of the Gulf States’ roles in East Africa. Even though the HoA and the Gulf share historical relations, geographic proximity, and political links, cooperation between both regions increased dramatically in the years following the Yemeni war (Soliman 2017).

This article argues that the current proactive Saudi-Emirati policies in the HoA are aimed at containing the threats emanating mainly from the Iranian and the more recent Turkish role.

In an attempt to assess the validity of this thesis, this article will first provide a brief literature review on alliance-building. It will then assess the Iranian influence in the HoA and the Saudi-Emirati countermeasures. Similarly, it will shed a light on the Turkish policies in the region, and how the Riyadh–Abu Dhabi alliance means to thwart the perceived Turkish long-term threats. Finally, it will assess the implications of these rising rivalries over the stability of the states of the HoA.
ALLIANCE-BUILDING

According to Goldstein (1995, 47–48), balance-of-power theory suggests that states can counter perceived threats either by internal means by increasing their own capabilities or by external means by forming alliances with like-minded states (Dwivedi 2012, 228). However, there are several conceptions of why states balance. While Kenneth Waltz argues that states balance against a nation’s power capabilities alone, Stephan Walt argues that states balance against the perceived threats rather than power alone (Yetiv 2006, 71–72).

Accordingly, states join forces in order to deter stronger powers from pursuing aggressive threatening policies, as states risk their own survival if they fail to curb a potential hegemon (Walt 1985, 4–5). Threats, according to Walt (1987, vi) are in turn a function of power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions.

History is replete with examples where countries chose to enter alliances against the more powerful opponent, as evident in the British policy to form counter-coalitions against the most dominating power in the European continent for 400 years. Similarly, the United States adopted rapprochement policies with China rather than with the Soviet Union, because the former is the weaker power in a triangular relationship (Walt 1985, 4–5).

On the other hand, other scholars argue that states not only balance between either power or threat but also between interests. Thus, they shift their focus from national security to national interest. Balance of interests’ scholars base themselves on Lord Palmerston’s famous saying: “Nations have no permanent enemies and allies; they only have permanent interests.” Still, this line of thinking is considered an integral part of the realist tradition (Thakur 2003).

The main argument they present is that countries do not act according to the dictates of “national security” only, but in some circumstance, they pursue policies that satisfy their national interests, as evident in Washington’s intervention in the Vietnam War that clearly did not present a threat to the American territories. Thus, countries balance against other states to defend political values, ideological principles, and a favorable world order (Thakur 2003).

As for the definition of alliances, Snyder (1997, 4) defined it as: “formal associations of states for the use or non-use of military force, in specified circumstances, against states outside their own membership.” However, Walt (1985, 1) defined it as: “[a] formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states.” Walt’s conception of alliance politics clearly deviated from Snyder’s definition, especially regarding the degree of formality and the purpose of the security cooperation. Snyder perceives
alliances as formal agreement with the purpose of using the military, while Walt regards informal security cooperation as a form of alliance. Thus, Walt's conception includes both formal alliances, based on a written treaty, and ad-hoc agreements based either on tacit understandings or on some form of commitment, such as verbal assurances or joint military exercises.

Walt's conception seems more realistic, since there are many historical examples when states provided considerable support to one another even without a formal treaty, while the presence of a formal agreement does not necessarily reveal the actual degree of commitment (Walt 1997, 157).

A prominent example in this context is America's treaty of 1778 with France, which committed Washington to join France in a war if it were attacked by Great Britain. France entered into war with its neighbors, including Britain from 1792. Rather than supporting France militarily, the United States issued its Proclamation of Neutrality in 1793 (Murphy 2019).

Byman (2006, 773) argued that alliances range from one-time, ad-hoc cooperation, at one end, to an integrated military structure, at the other. He named two main variables for assessing the power of an alliance: the level of integration and the commonality of the members' strategic goals. Alliance integration depended heavily on three things: common interests, common values, and the utility of integrated military cooperation. The latter is considered a factor of a shared threat (774). The strategic goal is represented in whether or not the members of the alliance share the same objectives and threat perceptions.

The most institutionalized and integrated form is NATO, with its extensive bureaucracy and decision-making procedure. At the other extreme, there are ad-hoc coalitions, such as the Axis powers alliance before and during World War II (1939–45), or inter-Arab alliances in which each member country acted relatively independently (Walt 1997, 157).

According to Snyder (1984, 462), two factors control a state's decision about whether or not to join an alliance, which could be summarized as follows:

- Enhance their security: some states may not be satisfied with only moderate security and they can increase it substantially by joining the alliance.
- Avoid isolation: some states, fearing that other states will not abstain from joining alliances, will ally in order to avoid isolation or to preclude the partner from allying against them.

Furthermore, leading countries within an alliance adopt “binding strategies,” namely, “a state’s attempt to maintain or enhance an ally’s loyalty to
their alliance” by using economic, political, and military instruments (Izum Ikawa 2018, 110).

Binding strategies could be either rewarding or coercive. The most common rewards are the offering of stronger security commitments, foreign aid, the transfer of specific assets, and political support (Izum Ikawa 2018, 110). The United States and former Soviet Union (USSR) provided military and economic aid to various developing countries in their competition to establish alliances during the Cold War (Snyder 1984, 41).

Coercive binding is deprivations of what a target state positively values, such as cutting foreign aid, or imposing economic sanctions, or even a threat of force (Izum Ikawa 2018, 110). An example of such a policy is President Donald Trump’s threats to impose sanctions on Germany and some European companies in an attempt to impede the construction of “Nord Stream 2,” a Russian gas pipeline that brings Russian gas to the heart of Europe bypassing the Baltic States (Gramer, Johnson, and de Luce 2018).

THE SAUDI-UAE ALLIANCE AND THREAT PERCEPTIONS

Until late 2014, the Saudi and Emirati interests in the HoA were economically driven by the need to ensure food security through investment in the agricultural sectors. Both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have shown an interest in investing in the banking and service sectors. This development is driven by the fact that the return on foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa is higher compared with other countries in the developing world, in addition to the growing purchasing power of the middle class which would increase the demand for foreign and African-made goods (Meester, van den Berg, and Verhoeven 2018, 26).

In addition, the UAE has always been keen to invest in the maritime and logistical sectors in the region. Maritime traffic through Africa’s ports is expected to increase dramatically from 300 million tons in 2017 to more than 2 billion tons in 2040, which is attributed largely to the rise in consumer demand and improved internal infrastructure. Accordingly, the UAE is trying to upgrade the ill-equipped African ports to share in the economic benefits with African countries (Allison and Danap 2017, 10). With involvement in the management of the ports of Assab, Berbera, and Kismayu, the UAE has managed to establish a network of maritime ports within the Red Sea (Taddele 2019).
However, the strategic importance of the HoA increased after the Saudi-led coalition’s intervention in Yemen to support Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi’s government in Yemen against the Houthi-led coup. Thus, the Saudi and Emirati policies in the HoA are driven not purely by national security considerations only but also by national economic interests.

It could be argued that three main reasons augmented the Saudi-Emirati threat perceptions of Iran and forced them to strengthen their military presence in the HoA. First, Iran exploited the HoA to smuggle weapons to the Houthis in Yemen (Conflict Armament Research 2016). Second, Iran pursued aggressive policies to extend its regional influence in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen after the chaos that engulfed the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2011. Third, the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iranian nuclear deal, in July 2015, which lifted sanctions on Iran, allowed Tehran to continue its regional policies unabated (Huliaras and Kalantzakos 2017, 65).

Alternately, the Turkish strategy in the HoA initially aimed at economic gains. However, over the past few years, the Turkish role has shifted towards boosting military and security relations as well. The Turkish presence in the HoA has raised various concerns about Ankara’s intentions in the region, especially in the light of the Qatar crisis of June 2017 in which Saudi Arabia and the UAE severed their relations with Doha.

Turkey chose to align itself with Doha owing to its adoption of similar policies after the Arab Spring, namely, the support of the Muslim Brotherhood groupings in the region, as well as governments affiliated with them such as Sudan and Somalia (Gurbuz 2018). In return, Saudi Arabia and the UAE raised their concerns regarding the long-term intentions of such an alliance. Those concerns were allayed after Turkish Defense Minister Fikri Isik held talks with his Sudanese and Qatari counterparts, on January 8, 2018, in Sudan, to discuss enhancing military ties. In addition, Turkey’s active policies to implicate Saudi Prince Mohammad bin Salman in the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and its criticism of the Saudi war in Yemen, further strained the relations between both countries.

In the light of the scramble of regional powers, which adopt policies deemed threatening to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the presence of both countries in the HoA has taken on a new dimension, focusing on building strategic alliances with countries in the region in an attempt to secure their interests.
Accordingly, this article will examine the Iranian and Turkish policies in the HoA, as well as the measures adopted by the Saudi-Emirati alliance in the context of alliance-building theory.

**IRAN’S ROLE AND INFLUENCE IN THE HORN OF AFRICA**

Iran’s presence in the HoA was mainly directed to achieve several objectives. First, Tehran attempts to accumulate influence in the vicinity of strategic waterways and consolidates its presence in countries and ports overlooking these waterways. Thus, Iran targets specifically the HoA that overlooks the Bab al-Mandib strait and the southern part of the Red Sea.

This region retains a strategic importance for European countries and the United States; almost all the trade between the European Union and its key trade partners—China, Japan, and India—passes through this strait. In addition, thirty percent of the world’s oil, including all the oil and natural gas from the Persian Gulf heading to Europe, passes daily through the HoA (Mountain 2011).

According to Iranian calculations, the HoA could be used as a base to target Israeli, American, and moderate Arab countries’ vessels, should its nuclear facilities be attacked (Chimarizeni 2017, 41).

Second, Iran tries to entrap Saudi Arabia given that Iran’s primary aim is to forge relations with East African countries in order to maximize its economic and military influence in the region vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia (Manjang 2017, 53).

Third, Tehran’s long-term objective is to consolidate its influence in the HoA by spreading the Shi’ite faith. It aims to create loyal domestic constituencies in order to retain power over East African governments and to disrupt Western interests in Africa (Kassab 2018).

Fourth, Tehran would use the HoA as a logistical base to support its proxies throughout the region. It is well documented that Iran used its relations with Sudan to smuggle military equipment through Egypt to the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip (Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center 2009, 3). Furthermore, Sudan was an essential gateway for weapons smuggled to insurgent groups in West Africa, including terrorist organizations such as Al-Qa’ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other jihadist groups (Bodansky 2013, 2).

In order to achieve the above-mentioned objectives, Tehran pursued an active policy in the HoA that tried to extend its influence by providing
financial aid and military support to countries in the HoA. Such activities resulted in consolidating Iranian economic and trade relations with East Africa (Kassab 2018).

Tehran’s relations with Sudan date back to 1989, when Omar al-Bashir seized power. In 1991, the two countries signed military cooperation agreements according to which Iran agreed to fund the establishment of a “popular defense militia” similar to the Basij. In April 1997, the two countries signed more than thirty agreements that entailed training for the Sudanese army and intelligence officers in Iran.

By 2007, Iran became one of the main suppliers of weapons to Sudan (Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center 2009, 3), and in March 2008, they signed a mutual defense agreement that consolidated defense ties and strengthened security cooperation in the HoA. Finally, Tehran established naval and logistical bases in Port Sudan. In return, Sudan channeled weapons to Iran’s regional proxies, including the Houthis in Yemen (Farrar-Wellman 2009a, 2009b) and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Thus, Khartoum retains a strategic importance in the Iranian strategy. Iranian officials reflected this importance in their statements, such as when as Iranian former Defense Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar described Sudan as “a cornerstone of Iran’s strategy in the African continent” (Abdullah 2016).

In addition, Iran attempted to strengthen relations with Eritrea, since both countries suffered from isolation and American sanctions. Tehran offered Asmara paths out of isolation and in return it allowed Tehran to establish a foothold in the southern Red Sea region in order to have influence over the Bab al Mandib strait (Lefebvre 2012, 126).

As for Djibouti, Iran expressed its intent to enhance military cooperation with Djibouti (Manjang 2017, 52). Tehran used Djibouti’s willingness to keep good relations with as many external powers as possible, which is reflected in its hosting a number of foreign militaries on its soil, sometimes of rivaling powers, such as the United States and China (van Genugten and Fikri 2017, 4). However, nothing has yet materialized.

In Somalia, Iran pursued a dual game to enhance its influence by establishing friendly relations with the Somali government, while at the same time actively supporting the Al Shabab terrorist organization aimed at overthrowing the government (The Soufan Group 2013). Tehran has been using Somalia since 2015 as a principal gateway for smuggling arms and supplies to the Houthi rebels fighting the Arab coalition in Yemen (Feierstein and Greathead 2017, 2).
Tehran smuggled weapons into northern Somalia (the autonomous Puntland and Somaliland regions), after which they moved further south into al-Shabaab strongholds, according to the United Nations Security Council’s sanctions monitoring team in 2013, which tracks compliance with sanctions on Somalia and Eritrea (Charbonneau 2013). Tehran was using its relations with terrorist organizations such as al-Shabaab to undermine American influence in East Africa. According to a report published by the UN Sanctions Monitor group in October 2018, Iran is complicit in illicit Somali charcoal exports that generate millions of dollars annually in tax to al-Shabaab (Nichols 2018).

**Turkey’s Role in the Horn of Africa**

Turkey has preserved long historical relations with East African countries under the Ottoman reign, as their rule lasted nearly 400 years in Sudan and 350 years in Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Kenya, and parts of Ethiopia (Kantack 2017). Around 2005, Turkey started to regain its influence in the region and became one of the emerging key regional players, especially after announcing its “Opening to Africa” strategy.

Turkey’s strategic objectives in the HoA can be summarized as follows. First, Ankara’s strategy aimed at enhancing economic relations and increasing bilateral trade volume between Turkey and Africa (Dost-Niyego 2018). Accordingly, Turkey’s bilateral trade volume with Africa increased three-fold from 2003 to reach US$18.8 billion in 2017, as exports totaled US$11.6 billion and imports US$7.1 billion. In addition, Turkish FDIs in African countries totaled US$6 billion (Demirci and Mehmet 2018). This trade volume is expected to increase over the coming years (Gurbuz 2018).

Second, Turkey started to establish a military presence in the HoA, which was evident in the establishment of the Turkish Military Training Center in Mogadishu in September 2017, which provides training to the Somali National Army (Hussein and Coskun 2017).

The recent militarization aspect of the Turkish strategy in East Africa could be attributed to various motives. The most significant of which are the following:

- A regional power with global outreach: Ankara tries to project itself as a central strategic state in East Africa (Kantack 2017). This role coincided with the fact that Turkey’s role in the Middle East and North Africa witnessed a number of setbacks following the fall of the
Muslim Brotherhood in several Arab countries, especially Egypt, and Libya, as well as the failure of Syrian opposition armed forces to defeat Bashar al-Assad, despite Turkish support.

• A security asset for the European Union and NATO: the European Union fears that the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the conflict-ridden countries of Somalia and South Sudan would result in a new wave of refugees and migrants (Gowan 2018). Thus, Turkey, relying on its military presence in East Africa, attempts to present itself as a reliable security partner for the European Union that can assist in European efforts to curtail the influx of refugees.

• Accumulating influence over regional rivals: Ankara aligned with Doha against the Arab Quartet countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt) during the Qatari crisis that erupted on June 5, 2017. Turkey initially tried to mediate between Doha and Riyadh. However, it swayed towards its alliance with Qatar by deploying troops and increasing its trade volume with the latter.

In a form of offensive step, Turkey and Qatar joined forces to develop their economic and military relations with Sudan. This was evident in the tripartite meeting between Turkish, Sudanese, and Qatari army chiefs in Khartoum on December 27, 2017. The meeting took place on the sidelines of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s visit to Sudan in which the latter approved leasing the strategic island of Suakin to Turkey for its development (Egypt Today 2018). The previously mentioned incidents raised the concern of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries about the intentions and motives of the Turkish presence in the HoA.

Furthermore, Turkey started to pursue more aggressive policies towards Saudi Arabia, calling for United Nations investigation into the murder of dissident Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and even tried to use the incident to disrupt American–Saudi relations (Khatana 2018).

In an attempt to achieve these goals, Ankara enhanced its relations with three countries in the HoA, namely, Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia. With Sudan, Turkey signed agreements worth US$650 on December 26, 2017, which includes Turkish investments in the construction of Khartoum’s new airport, as well as sector investments in cotton production, electricity generation, and the building of grain silos and meat slaughter houses, with Erdogan and Bashir planning to increase bilateral trade up to US$10 billion (Sputnik News 2017).
Yet, the most significant deal was leasing the Sudanese island of Suakin to Turkey in order to enhance economic and military cooperation. Sudan’s foreign minister confirmed that Turkey would rebuild Suakin and construct a naval dock to maintain civilian and military vessels, which could result in all kinds of military cooperation (Kucukgoçmen and Abdelaziz 2017). Doha was also part of this cooperation, as Sudan and Qatar reached a preliminary agreement worth US$4 billion to develop jointly the Red Sea port of Suakin (Reuters 2018). This development marked a clear indication that the port might host a Turkish naval base in Saudi Arabia’s backyard.

As for cooperation between Ankara and Djibouti, the Djiboutian ambassador to Ankara, Aden Abdilhai, stated that Djibouti was open to any kind of approach from Turkey such as building a military base to secure the Red Sea. So far, no military cooperation has materialized (Sevinç 2017).

Finally, Turkey has been one of the most prominent actors in Somalia. These relations culminated in the establishment of the first Turkish overseas military base in Mogadishu on September 30, 2017, after two years of construction. The base hosts about 200 Turkish troops, whose role is to train 10,000 Somali soldiers. Turkey also eyes enhancing weapons sales to Somalia (Kantack 2018).

In addition, the Qatari-Turkish axis maintained close ties with Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo, as Qatar was implicated in financing his election campaign, according to the United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia (Kantack 2017). Qatari influence was evident in Mogadishu’s rejection of a Saudi donation of US$80 million and reconsidering the DP World ports agreement with Somaliland as illegal.

Another dimension of the Turkish role in Somalia in particular is investing in education, as Turkish schools in Africa are increasing rapidly and are attempts to reshape Somali elites’ orientation and perceptions in a way favorable to Turkish interests (Özkan 2014, 19).

**SAUDI-EMIRATI ALLIANCE-BUILDING**

Saudi Arabia and the UAE pursued a policy of building alliances with some states in the HoA to weaken Iranian and Turkish threats in the region. Their policies followed Walt’s concept of developing ad-hoc informal forms of security cooperation between states relying on tacit understandings or some form of commitment, such as verbal assurances or joint military exercises, and
hosting military bases. Some HoA countries agreed to cooperate on a security level with the Saudi-Emirati alliance.

Saudi Arabia in particular appears to be willing to formalize this alliance. Riyadh declared in December 2018 the inauguration of an alliance including six countries on the coast of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden: Egypt, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, and Jordan. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir implied that it might include a degree of security cooperation, as he considers the main objective of the alliance is to stabilize the region and to decrease the negative influence of outside powers. These statements might imply regional rivals namely Iran, Turkey, and Qatar (Kalin 2018).

Given past experience, it could be argued that the regional alliance will follow the form of ad-hoc alliances that are directed mainly to confront the security threats emanating from Iran and the Houthis. Still, it is not clear whether the member states share the overall objective of containing either Turkey’s or Qatar’s increasing influence in the HoA.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE used two main factors in cooperating with the HoA countries. First, they both provided financial aid to various countries in the region. It was no coincidence that Somalia received a pledge of aid for US$50 million from Saudi Arabia on January 7, 2016, which was the very day it cut its diplomatic ties with Saudi rival Iran (Mc Dowall and Maclean 2016).

Moreover, Sudan received a US$1 billion deposit in its central bank from Riyadh to increase Sudan’s foreign reserves and ease the economic crisis it faces (The Guardian 2016). Riyadh reached a deal, facilitated by the Saudi Development Bank, to supply Khartoum with millions of tons of oil for the next five years after suffering from a growing energy crisis (Arabian Business 2018). The UAE invested about AED2.8 billion in Sudan, as seventeen Emirati companies are operating in various economic sectors (Emirates News Agency 2018). On the other hand, Eritrea’s army received military aid from the UAE during 2016 and 2017 (Manek 2017) after Asmara cut its relations with Iran.

Second, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have played a vital role in easing the American sanctions imposed on Sudan after it cut its relation with Iran, as both countries lobbied the Barack Obama administration to normalize relations with Khartoum, which resulted in Obama’s executive order before leaving office to ease the penalties temporarily. Also, these efforts continued during the Donald Trump administration, and helped play a role in the partial lifting of sanctions (Dahir 2017).

Eritrea is the other country in the HoA that suffered from isolation, especially from Ethiopia and the United States. However, its recent cooperation
with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE in order to stabilize Yemen will certainly impact the way Washington perceives Asmara. This may open the door for cooperation between Eritrea, the United States, and the European Union, especially on maritime security. Adding credibility to these assessments, there are reports about Washington’s expanding geostrategic interests in Eritrea (Weber 2017, 2).

In return for Saudi-Emirati support, the HoA countries adopted collaborative policies. First, several HoA countries either cut or downgraded their bilateral relations with Iran. Sudan expressed its solidarity with Saudi Arabia and cut its diplomatic relations with Iran on January 4, 2016, after the storming of the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran (Reuters 2016). Furthermore, Djibouti and Somalia severed their diplomatic relations with Iran later on for the same reason (The Economist 2016), in a move that signals their willingness to side with Saudi Arabia in its conflict with Iran (van Genugten and Fikri 2017, 1).

In addition, the UAE has leased the port of Assab for thirty years, and signed another deal for a twenty-five-year lease for air and naval bases in Berbera in 2017, after it reached a deal with Somaliland, the semi-autonomous region of northern Somalia (The Economist 2017). Saudi Arabia signed a military and defense agreement with Djibouti in April 2017 aiming to build a military base there. Furthermore, both countries are cooperating to prevent weapons smuggling from Iran to Yemen (Youssef 2017).

Third, the HoA countries supported the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen against the Houthis. Sudan, for instance, deployed 4000–10,000 men in Yemen (Huliaras and Kalantzakos 2017, 66). On the other hand, Eritrea has provided the coalition with its facilities, including the crucial port of Assab, which was used for launching multiple operations in Yemen, as well as training Yemenis to combat the Houthi alliance and terrorist groups (Ibsh 2017, 34), the latest of which is the use of the Assab base to station and train Saudi and Emirati troops before participating in the Hodeidah offensive (Coughlin 2018).

In addition, Eritrean troops reportedly participated in military operations inside Yemen (Rohrabacher 2017). The UAE has launched military operations from the Assab base, including air strikes in southern Yemen, while Emirati combat ships were involved in enforcing the naval blockade of the Yemeni ports of Hodeidah and Mokha (Hussein 2017).

Fourth, some HoA countries downgraded their relations with Qatar. Djibouti (Gulf News 2017) and Eritrea downgraded their relations with Doha, while the latter retaliated by withdrawing some 450 troops from the border of
Djibouti and Eritrea (Gaffey 2017), causing a minor rift between Eritrea and Djibouti.

However, other countries such as Sudan and Somalia cooperated with the Saudi-Emirati alliance in containing the Iranian threat, as evident in Sudan’s participation in the war in Yemen with an average of 5,000 troops (Stevis-Gridneff 2018). However, both countries tried to balance relations with UAE and Saudi Arabia on one side and Turkey and Qatar on the other.

This could be explained in the light of the ideological affinity between the Sudanese, Somali, Turkish, and Qatari regime, as they are lenient towards Islamist movements, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, balancing relations between both alliances enables Sudan and Somalia to reap economic benefits from both sides.

Another reason is the fact that both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi did not consider Turkey as a threatening actor. In addition, until recently Saudi Arabia considered Ankara a useful ally in the face of Iran’s rising influence in the Middle East. However, Turkey’s use of Khashoggi’s killing to pressure Riyadh may change the Saudi threat perception of Ankara’s role in the region.

REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The increasing presence of regional powers in the HoA has clearly impacted the balance of power and the disputes among the region’s member states, which could be elaborated as follows. First, the rising role of regional powers in the HoA countries shifted the regional balance of power in favor of Sudan and Eritrea at the expense of Ethiopia. Both countries are gaining more importance owing to the attention given by the Gulf countries, Europe, and the United States, albeit for different reasons. The United States is concerned mainly with fighting terrorism and pacifying conflicts, while the European Union is concerned with migration problems, and the Gulf countries are concerned mainly with containing regional security threats (Weber 2017, 2).

Second, the rising Saudi and Emirati role in the HoA did not exacerbate regional conflicts. On the contrary, Addis Ababa begins to recognize that its policy of containment against Asmara was failing, especially as the United Nations arms embargo on the latter is gradually eroding because there is no evidence that Eritrea is currently implicated in supporting al-Shabab militants in Somalia (Gardner 2017). Ethiopia, on the other hand, enjoys an important position in the Gulf strategy to achieve food security, as Saudi Arabia purchased about 124,000 hectares in Ethiopia (Allison and Danap 2017, 11).
However, it appears that the UAE is intending to lessen the impact of its enhanced relations with Eritrea over Ethiopia. This was witnessed in the deal the UAE struck with Ethiopia in April 2018, according to which Addis Ababa acquired a nineteen percent stake in the port of Berbera in Somaliland following an agreement with DP World (fifty-one percent) and the Somaliland Port Authority (thirty percent) (*Gulf News* 2018).

Moreover, the Saudi-Emirati role mediated successfully between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which culminated in the historic peace record that the leaders of both countries signed on July 9, 2018, which not only ended a long-running conflict but also opened the way for signing trade and security agreements (*Khan* 2018). This was an additional indication that the Emirati-Saudi presence contributed positively to regional security environment.

Likewise, the conflictual relations between Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia over the construction of the renaissance dam, and the Egyptian water share, might increase tensions in the region, especially after the enhancing of relations between Egypt, Eritrea, and the UAE. Sudanese Assistant President Ibrahim Mahmoud Hamid said there were potential security threats from Egypt and Eritrea over a rumored Egyptian forces presence in Eritrea. Furthermore, both Sudan and Ethiopia deployed a joint military force on the Sudanese–Ethiopian border on January 16, 2018 (*The Arab Weekly* 2018).

Despite all these concerns, all stakeholders have shown a high degree of self-restraint and an increasing willingness to use negotiations as a safe option to resolve their conflicts. This is especially evident after Ethiopia declared that the construction of the renaissance dam would be delayed until 2022 (*Global Construction Review* 2018), thus alleviating Cairo’s water concerns.

Another case in point is that various regional countries, such as Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, in addition to Qatar and Turkey, supported President Omar al Basir in the face of the popular demonstrations that erupted in January 2019 asking him to leave power (*Gjorvad* 2019).

**CONCLUSIONS**

This article revealed the role played by regional powers such as Iran and Turkey in the HoA, and how this is perceived negatively by both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Starting from 2015, both countries have pursued policies that aimed specifically at building alliances with the HoA countries, initially to thwart the Iranian influence in the region, and to contain any future moves on the part of Turkey and Qatar to threaten Saudi-Emirati interests there.
The Saudi-Emirati relations with HoA countries have managed to weaken the Iranian influence in the region and end the isolation of Sudan and Eritrea. However, the Turkish–Qatari axis is more challenging to the Saudi-Emirati alliance, and has a far more polarizing effect on HoA countries.

This was evident in Somalia, which aligned itself with Qatar and Turkey, and Somaliland which adopted the Saudi-Emirati stance over Qatar. However, Sudan is the only country in the HoA that has so far tried to balance its relations with both alliances. While it contributed to the ongoing military operations in Yemen, it hosts a Turkish base in Suakin.

The Turkish presence in both Somalia and Sudan is not threatening compared with the Iranian presence, and in some circumstances may aid in countering the Iranian influence in the region, as in Somalia. However, if Turkey increased its military presence in Sudan, or adopted more active policies with Qatar in the region, this would increase the perceived threats of the Turkish role in the long run.

While establishing military bases and increasing the Saudi and Emirati economic role in the HoA were successful in containing the Iranian threats, direct dialogue with Ankara may be a feasible policy to understand the true nature of the Turkish role in this region, and what impact it may have on the security of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

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