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Reflections from contemporary scholarship

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THE MIDDLE EAST AND EASTERN AFRICA INTERSECTED: DISCUSSING CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS

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The Middle East and Eastern Africa intersected: Discussing contemporary connections

Historically, the interaction between the Middle East and Eastern Africa has resulted in mutual penetration of cultural, economic, and political influences. In more recent times, it is assumed that the Middle East has influenced Eastern Africa more. Do the distinct regional traits, and what are currently considered asymmetrical relations, eliminate the possibility of developing equal and mutually respectful relationship between the two different but deeply intertwined regions? To answer this question and attempt to contribute to the debate on the intersection and the dynamics underpinning contemporary relations, we explore links between the two regions through historically conscious reflections. We argue for leveraging productively on the complex and deeply entrenched inter-regional ties by engagement based on equality, respect, and mutual benefit.

Keywords: Middle East, Eastern Africa, inter-regional relations, power, influence, mutual benefit

Intersecções entre o Oriente Médio e a África Oriental: Conexões contemporâneas

Historicamente, a interação entre Médio Oriente e África Oriental resultou na penetração mútua de influências culturais, económicas e políticas. Em tempos contemporâneos, supõe-se que o Médio Oriente tenha influenciado mais a África Oriental. Será que os traços regionais distintos, e o que hoje são consideradas relações assimétricas, eliminam a possibilidade de desenvolver relações iguais e mutuamente respeitadas entre as duas regiões diferentes, mas profundamente entrelaçadas? Para responder a esta questão e tentar contribuir para o debate sobre a intersecção e as dinâmicas que sustentam as relações contemporâneas, exploramos os vínculos entre as duas regiões através de reflexões historicamente conscientes. Defendemos o aproveitamento produtivo dos laços inter-regionais complexos e profundamente arraigados através de engajamento baseado na igualdade, respeito e benefício mútuo.

Palavras-chave: intersecção, Médio Oriente, África Oriental, relações inter-regionais, poder, influência, mútuo benefício

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An assessment of aspects of contemporary relations between the Middle East and Eastern Africa should begin with the acknowledgment of the historical interconnectedness and interaction between the two dynamic regions (Mazrui, 1975). Geographically, the Middle East and Eastern Africa, as far as they are currently understood, are adjacent to each other and share the water bodies of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Nile River. Historically, factors such as geography and culture have characterized the nexus between the two. The first Muslims from Mecca fearing persecution sought and were granted refuge in the Empire of Axum around present-day Ethiopia, which at one time controlled the Red Sea trade as well as the southern Arabian Peninsula. Since then, cultural influences, particularly Islam, but also Arabic language and customs from the Arabian Peninsula took root in Northern and Eastern Africa and have greatly influenced their cultures. The same applies to the influence of Christianity and the related customs in Ethiopia and Egypt (Negash & Teshome-Bahiru, 2010), as well as in East Africa.

Economically, the regions have enjoyed deep historical and contemporary commercial and trade connections rooted in their geographic proximity and related cultural, social, and political interactions. Arab slave trade formed part of the economic, social, and political relations between the two regions for centuries and resulted in a perception of a social hierarchy between “Arabs” and “Africans” which still resonates today in attitudes towards the “African”, particularly in Northern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula (Fröhlich, 2019; Pavlu, 2018). More recently, financial capital, aid, investment, land, labor, and migration have been at the crux of economic relations. Politically, Eastern Africa has always been in close contact with the Middle East, particularly in relation to Middle East power competition and geopolitical strategies, which in recent times have included issues such as security, conflict, and terrorism that are not disconnected from attempts to maintain stability or create a new order through religious propagation, revolution, and insurgency (Ulrichsen, 2011, p. 120).

This article discusses some of the significant aspects of the relationship between the Middle East and Eastern Africa. While recognizing the historical depth of the interaction between the two regions, it focuses on contemporary and current aspects of the complex and multifaceted relationship by discussing examples that illustrate some of its important dynamics. Drawing on academic literature from various disciplinary traditions, including history, politics, and international relations, as well as from online articles, reports, and news sources, the article discusses the interconnection between the Middle East and Eastern Africa. Through this interdisciplinary lens, it shows that a critical reading of the nexus between

the two regions reveals a complex landscape of deep-seated perceptions, political and security challenges, and economic realities that hide behind the deemed power asymmetries. The article's findings suggest that overcoming some of the present challenges requires the actors from both regions to productively embrace the complex and deep-rooted inter-regional ties in a balanced, equal, and mutually respectful manner. This should unlock the potential of developing a richer relationship of shared interaction based on equality, respect, and mutual benefit between actors from the two rather different but deeply interconnected regions.

Brief historical background of relations between the Middle East and Eastern Africa

Connections between three major religions, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, and associated cultural spheres, have characterized the local and regional context within the Middle East and Eastern Africa for more than a millennium. Mobility and exchange along trade and pilgrimage routes on both sides of and across the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean, played a major role in the spread of ideas and influences. These were not only vectors for the extension of Islam and Arabic language and cultural influence, but also led to their adaptation in the local context (Mazrui, 1975, p. 726). Similarly, the meeting of various cultural influences led to reconfiguration, as well as efforts to preserve, Christian, Jewish, animist, and hybrid local traditions. By observing these connections, it is possible to note that Muslim and Christian communities did not always clash in places such as medieval Nubia and Ethiopia despite periodically developing conflictive relations. Although Islam was regarded as a foreign import and, being restricted by the expansion of Christianity, played a more marginal role in the history of local societies of Eastern Africa, it became prominent in the Horn of Africa and coastal East Africa (Mazrui, 1975, p. 275).

The Arabian Peninsula and the African continent have a long history of interaction that has resulted in shared cultures and identities that have transcended the trials of time to show their legacy in modern-day sub-Saharan Africa. In this, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean have served as water bodies connecting the two and merged especially cultural attributes. From the highlands and lowlands of Eritrea and Ethiopia to the coastlines of Somalia, Djibouti, and Kenya and the islands of Tanzania, to the interiors of Sudan and Mali, the influence of Arabic culture and Islamic faith are evident in the language, traditions, architecture, and religious practices of millions of people in sub-Saharan Africa (Shiferaw, 2016, pp. 1-2).

Historically, in terms of economic relations, Eastern Africa and more specifically the countries of the Horn of Africa can be considered a source of food, commodities, and resources for the people of the arid Arabian Peninsula. This, according to Sudanese agricultural expert Abdul-Latif Alugaimi, explains the contemporary interests of Persian Gulf countries which, for instance, are looking at countries like Sudan, and Ethiopia, to feed themselves and fill their potential food security gap in the future (Amin, 2019, p. 2). They depend on Eastern Africa to varying degrees for food, natural resources, supplies, and labor, the latter of which they acquired historically through the slave trade. Slavery also generated still prevalent perceptions of social hierarchy based on ethnicity and culture, or social race, which are observable throughout the Arabian Peninsula as well as in Northern and Northeastern Africa (Austen, 2008; Deng, 1995, pp. 369-400, 484-485).

The millennial relations between Eastern African and Arabian polities east of the Red Sea were spurred by interaction characterized by trade, forced and voluntary migration, and the spread of cultural influences. Particularly since Arab migrations and settlement, and the accompanying spread of Islam, much of Eastern Africa acquired a hybrid character – a mix of local African and imported Middle Eastern cultural traditions which gradually became “local”. The cultural character with varying degrees of Arab and Islamic influence became dominant in parts of Eastern Africa, particularly in the coastal areas which were the geographically closest contact points and most exposed to Arab migration and culture. Interaction through trade, intermarriage, and exchange of cultural influences shaped and enriched the cultures of coastal peoples in Eastern Africa and generated further genetic and cultural hybridity among populations from Sudan to Tanzania and beyond (Brown, 1971). This also fed closer affinity with the Arabic world.

With the independence of African states, it became increasingly important to define relations between the states in the two regions. The above factors arising from the historical past, as well as anti-colonial solidarity with Arabs based on antagonism towards Israel and white-dominated South Africa (Mazrui, 1975, pp. 728-729), combined with the general poverty but rich resource base of African states and the immense financial wealth but lack of human and agricultural resources of the oil-producing Middle East countries, came to characterize relations between the two regions. Asymmetric inter-regional power relations were in part responsible for political competition and conflicts between Middle East powers resonating in the African continent which the leading Arab states have considered strategically important for ensuring their own security and political

stability. This can be observed in relations between individual states, as well as “almost organically linked” regional organizations such as the Organization of African Unity (today’s African Union) and the Arab League (Azevedo, 1988, p. 68).

In short, the cultural, political, and economic relations between Eastern Africa and the Middle East are millennial. While African empires and sultanates were once powerful, extending their influence over the Sinai, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden, they later gave way to powerful forces from the Arabian Peninsula which spread to Northern and Eastern Africa. Today’s material realities and perceptions of Gulf Arab aid, investment, and preferential trade arrangements targeting African states need to be understood against this background. In all aspects of the contemporary relationship, it is important to factor in the long and deep history of relations between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. After all, the societies of the Gulf have profoundly influenced the economic, political, and socio-cultural landscape of the Horn of Africa and vice versa (Meester et al., 2018, p. 12).

Middle East - Eastern Africa relations during the Cold War

During the Cold War, strategic and political relations between the Middle East and Eastern Africa intensified. These relations were not only defined by the bipolar competition between the United States and the Soviet Union but drew on Middle Eastern conflicts and attempts of containing regional rivals. The political dimension of the relations became emphasized after the 1956 Suez Crisis when Arab powers and Israel headed towards proxy confrontation in the Red Sea region and Eastern Africa to secure their neighborhood from the influence of their main regional rivals. Cultural and religious justifications in the Arab - Eastern African relations became intertwined with the political aspects. For example, Egypt’s influence in Sudan included support of the government in the civil war in which Israel supplied the southern rebels, while Arab states aided primarily the Muslim section of the Eritrean liberation movement and Ethiopia maintained close relations with Israel (Lefebvre, 1996).

Culture-religious influence can also be illustrated by Eastern African students who studied Salafi views of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and Wahhabi teachings in Saudi Arabia in the early 1960s. However, this influence was limited as the followers of these schools of Islamic thought had little initial success in propagating their views among eastern Africans who overwhelmingly followed Sufi traditions. In the 1970s, some of the Wahhabi believers created The Unity

of Islamic Youth (Wahdat al-Shabaab al-Islamiyya) and The Islamic Group (al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya) which merged in 1982 to form the Islamic Union - al-Ittihad al-Islamiyya or AIAI (Shinn, 2011, pp. 203-215).

The Cold War intensification of the relations between the Middle East and Eastern African countries also had important economic dimensions. These interactions were not separate but, in most cases, connected to the political and cultural aspects of these relations. Particularly from the 1973 Arab - Israeli War and the ensuing oil crisis onwards (Jeffrey, 2018, p. 5), politically induced economic aspects of relations between Eastern African and Middle Eastern states became highlighted. While African states needed to fuel their increasingly ailing economies, the leading Persian Gulf states, headed by Saudi Arabia, sought to turn the Red Sea into an "Arab Lake" and the Horn of Africa as their "breadbasket". There was an aspiration to exploit Eastern African resources, namely land and labor, in exchange for primarily financial support (e.g. central bank deposits) and investment enabled by the petrodollars, the windfall returns for oil exports. Again, the political dimension of this economic approach involved containing Israel but also securing the shipping lanes through the narrow stretches of the Red Sea during and after the closure of the Suez Canal (1967-1975).

The skyrocketing oil prices caused by the Arab-Israeli crisis resulted in a considerable enrichment of the Persian Gulf countries which took advantage of the financial boom to carry out economic and infrastructure development (Maru, 2019). In this context, the oil-rich Arab countries largely withdrew from Africa to concentrate on their own economic development, which became an important pull factor for particularly those African migrants living in nearby culturally similar countries across the Red Sea. These migrants came to form an important workforce to fuel the economic boom and became large diasporas whose remittances represented a considerable part of external financial flows to Eastern Africa which some countries, such as Sudan, came to largely rely on (Chevrillon-Guibert, 2016, para. 5). Since then, the Eastern African states sought to obtain economic benefits (e.g., investments, development, and aid) from petro-monarchies and thus benefit from their growth (Novel, 2018a). The African migration and provision of low-cost labor in the Gulf States, however, reinforced the pre-existing perceptions of Arab-centric social hierarchy arising from the history of slavery. Many African migrant workers were subjected to difficult labor conditions, and at times ill-treatment and abuse, upholding perceptions of social inequality and resulting in issues that continue to form part of Middle East - Africa relations today.

Meanwhile, countries such as Somalia, Djibouti, Egypt, and Sudan invoked their cultural and religious connections with the Persian Gulf countries in a bid to gain help in dealing with their grave financial deficits and political instability. Arab nations seized the opportunity, using their wealth and newfound geostrategic importance to seek to expand their influence in Eastern Africa by buying access to resources and key loyalties (Jeffrey, 2018, p. 5). The end of the Cold War, especially in the early 1990s, was considered the decade of abandonment of Africa by a number of the Persian Gulf countries. In 1989, the coming to power in Sudan of an Islamist-military coalition with ideologue Hassan al-Turabi and president Omar al-Bashir, which claimed international status as the most prominent political Islamist project, led the leading Arab state investors, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, to divest from the country. In addition, state collapse in Somalia, the socialist ideological orientation of independent Eritrea and Ethiopia, as well as conflicts in the Middle East, dissuaded many Arab countries from engaging in economic investment in the Horn of Africa for the time being.

In the early 1990s, Sudan aspired to become the beacon of political Islam by organizing the Popular Arab and Islamic Congress and forging closer ties with Iran. Tehran, in turn, sought an increasing foothold in the southern flank of its rival, Saudi Arabia. This growing interest to promote radical political Islam involved violent approaches, including terrorism. Sudan hosted armed Islamists such as al-Qaeda leader Osama bin-Laden, supported radical movements in the neighboring countries, and was involved in the assassination attempt of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 1995 (“Three Suspects Arrested”, 1995). In another development linking Arab armed Islamists to the Horn of Africa, Mohammed Atef, an Egyptian-born high-ranking al-Qaeda official considered by the United States intelligence services as a military planner of al-Qaida, visited Somalia in 1992, seeking a bridge for an Islamist alliance in Somalia and throughout Eastern Africa. The United States intelligence also identified him as having masterminded the bombing of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 (Dawoud, 2001, p. 1). While the Sudanese government’s propagation and support of violent actors of political Islam withered due to crippling American sanctions and civil war, Salafist ideas emanating from the Arabian Peninsula gained an increasing foothold in Somalia. The emphasis on religion as the guiding societal force to rebuild the country was not disconnected from the rise of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) and the subsequent Ethiopian intervention in 2006-7 in defense of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) which led to ICU’s disintegration and the radical splinter groups forming armed Islamist opposition that culminated in the consolidation of al-Shabaab (van Ginkel & van der Putten, 2010, p. 39).

Meanwhile, similarly to Iran, Qatar, with its new leader Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, who deposed his father in a bloodless coup in 1995 (Cockburn, 1995), took advantage of the brief withdrawal of its Arab competitors to establish itself in Eastern Africa from the mid-1990s onwards. Portraying itself as a mediator, Qatar supported religious grassroots and social movements, which became a factor in the Arab Spring-related political mobilization, while its major rival, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and its major partner, Saudi Arabia, sought to maintain political status quo in its neighborhood (Almezaini & Rickli, 2017).

Post-Cold War relations: Arab Spring and beyond

In the post-Cold War period, and particularly in the last decade, some scholars have characterized Eastern Africa as a political and economic battleground between the leading Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Jeffrey, 2018) but also a region where they exert religious influence. Ethiopia is a good example. With Menelik II's late 19th century conquests, the country tripled its size which shifted the population balance towards a Muslim majority. Approximately a century later, Meles Zenawi-led Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front government's approach to state-building recognized the realities of modern Ethiopia and the changed international context following the Cold War, thereby endeavoring to build a seemingly more inclusive administration by formally including Muslims along with an array of representatives from previously excluded ethnic groups into the country's political mainstream. While political opening led to stronger relations with the Persian Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia (Fakude, 2017), the new space for political expression may have provided fertile ground for both Saudi Wahhabists and al-Qaeda to promote their visions for the region (Erich, 2007). Ethiopia's dominance in the Horn of Africa has also been about forging unity in the sub-region (Rondos, 2016, p. 154), and its relations with its neighbors have been affected by the Persian Gulf states' involvement (Fakude, 2017).

The Persian Gulf states have continued to consider Eastern Africa as their security, political, and economic neighborhood. While Saudi Arabia and the UAE have sought to advance their influence to drive out rival powers and create stability by backing dictatorships, Qatar and Turkey have opted for supporting popular movements and civil society. For example, two decades from 1999 Saudi Arabia invested an estimated US\$12 billion in Sudan to support Omar al-Bashir and ensure military dictatorship over the potentially destabilizing popular Islamist revolutionary movement. Similarly, the UAE and Qatar's investments in Sudan

were estimated at US\$7 billion and US\$4 billion, respectively, in the same period (Amin, 2019, p. 2). Although this money has brought influence, it has not quelled the local agency and failed to maintain the political status quo when the al-Bashir regime faced a popular uprising that led to its demise.

Since the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia has used foreign aid as its most relevant tool to maintain favorable stability in regional politics (Ardemagni, 2016, p. 2). On the other hand, Qatar encouraged the Arab uprisings in part to elevate its regional profile as a mediator (Echagüe, 2014, p. 1), as in the case of the conflicts between Eritrea and Sudan, Eritrea and Djibouti, and Darfur (Mesfin, 2016, p. 2), and most recently between Kenya and Somalia (Custers, 2021). Qatar's involvement, as well as Iran's close ties with Sudan and Eritrea in particular, contributed to Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's eagerness to "secure" the Eastern Africa region. In 2011 Turkey entered Somalia on a humanitarian mission and has since become an important peace- and state-building (Sazak & Woods, 2017) and somewhat controversial development and trade partner (Ahmed, 2021), while also playing a crucial role in shaping developments in Eastern Africa and beyond (Cannon & Rossiter, 2017).

The strong relationship between Saudi Arabia and Sudan, involving an important Sudanese diaspora in the former, ensured Riyadh's long-term support of the al-Bashir regime as well as the current military government. Saudi influence culminated in the early 2010s in a review and abandonment of Sudan's relations with Iran, and the strong ties between the governments of the two countries later led to the sending of several thousands of Sudanese soldiers to aid the intervening Saudi-led coalition in Yemen in return for financial support (Novel, 2018b). At the core of Saudi Arabia's and its junior partner UAE's, expansion of influence to Eastern Africa was an intent to safeguard its neighborhood from destabilizing forces and minimize Iranian influence by supporting the incumbent Riyadh and Abu Dhabi-aligned regimes (Ardemagni, 2016; Heath, 2020). Meanwhile, Qatar and Turkey have encouraged a more bottom-up approach emphasizing the importance of societal, and often religiously oriented, legitimacy of governments in the Horn and Northeastern Africa. This has led Egypt to oscillate between the two groups of states but since Abdel Fattah al-Sisi captured power Cairo has sided strongly with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Economic ties have accompanied the orientations of political relations, as Eastern African and Middle Eastern states have engaged largely in transactional interactions. Investment and trade have picked up in connection to political partnerships. This has taken place within the strategic framework of securing foreign and domestic political stability and food security, particularly for the leading

GCC countries. The UAE has also been particularly active in investing in and operating strategic logistical infrastructure which has ensured tactical presence, especially in the Red Sea littoral and the Gulf of Aden. Turkey, on the other hand, has focused largely on expanding trade, infrastructure, and its moderate Islamic humanitarian and development presence. This has connected Middle Eastern powers increasingly with Eastern Africa and generated a degree of dependency on African labor and resources, while on the other hand, Eastern African countries with close ties with Middle Eastern regimes have benefited from their financial resources (Donelli, 2020).

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for example, have long held strong economic ties with Sudan. Recent reports indicate that the two Persian Gulf states gave a combined total of more than US\$100 million to former president al-Bashir alone, with US\$25 million coming exclusively from Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (Heath, 2020). In Somalia, especially with the rise of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), Qatar played a powerful role. Influential diaspora members reportedly negotiated the arrival of some ICU leadership, including Sheikh Sharif Ahmed, to Qatar after Ethiopia invaded Somalia in 2006 and ended the ICU's rule. Moreover, the subsequent election of Sheikh Sharif as President in 2009 was possibly funded by Qatar even though he later fell out with Doha when it insisted on expanding the government to include Islamists such as Hassan Dahir Aweys, a former ICU president and Eritrean ally (Cannon, 2019, pp. 31-32).

Finally, migrant labor networks are an important element of the economic relationship between Persian Gulf states and Eastern Africa. Many migrant workers from Eastern Africa provide Persian Gulf states with cheap, unskilled, labor. Although Persian Gulf states do not release detailed data on the migrant communities they host, Sudanese, Ethiopians, and Eritreans are thought to be among the largest communities. In 2015, the United Nations estimated that approximately 540,000 Sudanese lived in Persian Gulf states, roughly a third of the entire Sudanese diaspora (Todman, 2018, p. 3). About half a million Ethiopians and an estimated 100,000 Eritreans are believed to work in Saudi Arabia, while over 100,000 Ethiopians work in the UAE (Kannan, 2012; Valenta & Jakobsen, 2018). Also, over 100,000 Ugandans have been estimated to be working in the Persian Gulf countries ("More than 100,000", 2020). Africans are necessarily not the largest migrant communities in the Persian Gulf states, but their remittance flows are a critical source of income for countries in Eastern Africa, meaning they represent an important source of Persian Gulf states' economic influence in Africa (Todman, 2018, p. 3). On the other hand, migrants' labor provision and extensive presence in the Arabian Peninsula elevate the importance of Eastern African countries as partners for the Persian Gulf states.

Current Middle East rivalries in Eastern Africa

Emerging from the Arab Spring and its aftermath, and in connection to the war in Yemen, the leading GCC states have competed for influence across the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Joined by Turkey in 2011, and further fueled by the Qatar diplomatic crisis (2017-2021), this competition has had important political and economic repercussions in Eastern Africa, and more specifically in the Horn of Africa sub-region, which warrant a more specific discussion.

When Saudi Arabia cut ties with Qatar in June 2017, it was the third time in three years that it had called on the governments in the Horn of Africa to align their foreign policy with Riyadh. Earlier, in 2015, Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies had convinced the entire Horn – save Ethiopia – to sign up to its coalition against the Houthi movement in Yemen with a key priority given to curb Iran's support for the Houthis. Then, in early 2016 when Saudi Arabia broke relations with Iran, it was able to convince Djibouti, Sudan, and Somalia to do so as well (Mahmood, 2017). In the past decade, Saudi Arabia, and its junior partner the UAE, have sought to strengthen their relations with the Horn and Eastern African countries. Most Horn states appear to have aligned with Riyadh in the framework of the Middle Eastern "Cold War" between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Riyadh has mainly used its financial assets to convince the Horn of Africa governments, as in the case of Somalia which reportedly received a pledge of US\$50 million in aid from Saudi Arabia the same day it severed relations with Iran ("Somalia Received Saudi Aid", 2016). Moreover, given the degree of transnational linkages in the area, the sub-region encompassing the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, the Gulf of Aden, and wider Eastern Africa, will be more and more critical for the Arabian Peninsula's stability, to contain jihadist networks and the possible resurgence of piracy. Yemen lies at the heart of this sub-regional security complex and cannot be stabilized without a level of influence on the surrounding water bodies (Ardemagni, 2016). This has been a significant consideration in Abu Dhabi's regional security policy.

Persian Gulf countries have been politically and economically invested in the Horn of Africa. Notably Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for example, have placed Sudan and Ethiopia in their food security strategy, which also explains later investment in the agricultural sector (Novel, 2018c). They have also sought increased access to the growing Ethiopian market. Perhaps more visibly, security interests have also been pursued. In 2015, in the context of the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen, a Saudi-Emirati military base was to emerge at the narrowest stretches of the Red Sea in Djibouti. However, the project never mate-

rialized due to a diplomatic quarrel between Djibouti and Emirati governments. Following this event, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi turned to Eritrea where the UAE set up a base in Assab to support its Yemen operations and subsequently established port operations in Berbera, Somaliland, to engage in future logistics competition over Ethiopian trade against Chinese operating from Djibouti. This also meant a close partnership with the Eritrean government, which paved the way for its support of the Saudi-led coalition intervening in Yemen, the isolation of Qatar, and allowing the UAE and Saudi Arabia to successfully mediate the ground-breaking rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2018.

Meanwhile, Qatar played an important role in Eastern Africa. Doha has attempted to punch above its weight to counter the Saudi-UAE influence. From the late 1990s onwards, it adopted a mediation role in a number of conflicts in Eastern Africa, including in Darfur, Djibouti-Eritrea, and Sudan-Eritrea border conflicts, and in Somalia and its border tension with Kenya. Apart from its other mediation efforts, Qatar's engagement politically with Somalia following the rise to power of the ICU and seeking a peace agreement between the government of Sheikh Sharif Ahmed and the insurgent groups Hizbul Islam and the radical al-Shabaab militant group went into the heart of internal matters in the country. Its favorable approach to the "Arab Spring", encouraging social movements, and especially its diplomatic disdain toward black Africa which lasted until 2008 had negative consequences on its future relations with many African leaders. As an extension of the Persian Gulf rivalries, Doha, however, strongly supported the Mohamed Abdullahi "Farmaajo" administration (2017-2021) in Somalia against Saudi Arabia and the UAE. However, since the GCC embargo and change of leadership in Somalia, Doha has seemingly lost influence relative to its rivals in the Horn of Africa, although the isolation may have counter-intuitively strengthened its economy (Kabbani, 2021).

In 2011, as part of its new Africa policy, Turkey entered the Horn of Africa. Prompted by a famine that peaked during Ramadan and galvanized Turkish society, Somalia became a major focus of Ankara's aid programs and foreign policy agenda (International Crisis Group, 2012, p. 3). Turkey has since become a key player in the region, often in partnership with Qatar which it supported throughout the GCC diplomatic crisis. It has forged strong ties with Ethiopia and surrounding states and extended its political, economic, and commercial influence in wider Eastern Africa.

The recent involvement in the Horn of Africa's coastal area by the Gulf Arab states has led to a surge in development activities. Particularly the UAE, mainly through Dubai Ports World (DP World), has made significant investments in lo-

gistics and other sectors in the coastal states. At the same time, Qatar and Turkey have intensified their involvement in Eastern Africa, in part to counter Saudi Arabia and UAE's influence, and more specifically in the Horn region, where stakes are most crucial for Doha (Gillon, 2010), and where Turkish investors have made important economic and commercial gains. While genuine humanitarian concerns, at least initially, formed part of Turkey's revived engagement in the Horn of Africa, the prospects of economic gains have since played an important role in Turkey's developing relationship in the sub-region. Some have considered its relationship with Somalia to be exploitative (Ahmed, 2021).

These efforts by Middle East powers have coincided with various actions taken by Horn of Africa countries to shift the regional distribution of power to their advantage. This includes landlocked Ethiopia's strategic drive to reduce its dependence on Djibouti's port for imports and exports by encouraging the development of transport corridors to other regional ports: Berbera, Port Sudan, and Mombasa (Cannon & Rossiter, 2017, pp. 7-8). Other governments in the Horn of Africa, such as Somalia, have shifted external alignments with Middle Eastern powers to gain an advantage in domestic rivalries against powerful sub- and non-state individuals and groups, while others, such as Eritrean leadership, have used diverse external partnerships to gain prominence in the sub-region.

However, at the same time, the Middle East powers' economic competition has spread further in Eastern Africa. While Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have asserted themselves as the most important Middle East partners for Eastern African states, Qatar poses as an example of their relatively recent shifts in foreign policy focus. For a long time, Qatar's African foreign policy was focused on the Morocco-Algeria-Tunisia triptych with no real impact or presence in Sub-Saharan Africa. Qatar Charity as a notable exception, Doha's presence in many countries was minimal and far behind the Saudis and Emiratis. Even with its increased engagement particularly in the 2010s, Qatar's smaller economic size has meant that it has been obliged to pick its battles in its competition against the larger GCC rivals in Africa. For example, during Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani's 2019 visit to Rwanda, which led to one of Qatar's biggest investments in Africa, a member of the delegation was quoted as saying "we had to invest more on the continent, if only to counter hostile lobbying from the Emirates" (Gillon, 2010).

Moreover, the weakness of Doha's influence on the continent has undermined it. This was captured by the Comorian President Azali Assoumani who in 2010 stated that "I have decided to follow Saudi Arabia, a partner country for more than forty years, while Qatar has only been present here since 2008" (Gillon, 2010).

The economic argument weighed heavily. Yet, Qatar has continued to increase its focus on Africa. In 2020, Qatar Airways bought a 60 percent stake in the new Kigali Bugasera Airport and then a 49 percent stake in Africa's RwandAir, the state-owned airline of Rwanda (Darras, 2020). In fact, Qatar committed itself to financing more than half of the US\$1.3 billion price tag of a future airport, while Qatar Airways signed a partnership agreement with RwandAir with the intention of making Rwanda an air travel logistics and tourism hub. Although Qatar's motivation was in part to bypass the Saudi-UAE imposed air blockade in place since June 2017 (Gillon, 2019, p. 1), its actions represent a shift in its foreign policy orientation towards Africa and extend Doha's economic role in the continent.

Meanwhile, Rwandan authorities have also attracted investments from the UAE. Notably, in 2016 DP World signed a 25-year concession agreement with the government to construct and manage a mega facility (The Kigali Logistics Platform) that sits on about 30 hectares of land (Mwai, 2019). The cost of the first phase of the infrastructure which has high-tech equipment was estimated at US\$35 million (Nga, 2019) and Rwanda will benefit from the establishment of a world-class logistics facility that will increase the efficiency of its trade routes from and to the surrounding countries of Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, and Burundi as well as the central African region (Brufal, 2016). Speaking on the business opportunities between the UAE and Rwanda, the private sector federation chairperson Robert Bafakulera told the media in 2019 that among deliberations that were being considered was to identify ways to create partnerships for investments. Specifically, he noted that "we want people from Dubai to see opportunities in Rwanda, we want them to bring their experience and capital to work with us. When we talk to them, we are urging them to take advantage of the opportunities in value addition, processing agriculture, logistics among others" (Mwai, 2019).

Taking into consideration these developments, cooperation with the Qataris and the UAE allows Rwanda the opportunity to benefit from considerable investments which will make the country a strategic hub for the economic development of Central and Eastern Africa. It can play a role in bringing the Qatari and the Emirati increasingly together and establishing increasingly mutually beneficial African-Arab partnerships based on constructive interaction and the principle of equality.

In 2018, the UAE and Saudi Arabia provided critical diplomatic and financial support for the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Both Persian Gulf monarchies also appear to have sought to ease tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt in their dispute over the use of Nile waters. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, along with other Gulf monarchies and Turkey, are investing in Eastern Africa for

the long haul. Supporting Eritrea-Ethiopia diplomacy could be seen as a starting point for continuous engagement with Eastern African countries and could provide the initial basis for stronger engagement beyond mere transactional relations. This, however, does not take away the perception that Persian Gulf competition is seen as destabilizing in countries such as Somalia where the UAE and Saudi Arabia have confronted Qatar and Turkey (International Crisis Group, 2018, p. 2). In a recent development, however, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Turkey have seemingly strengthened ties and may become increasingly constructive in their engagement with the new Hassan Sheikh Mohamud administration in Somalia.

From the discussion above, it becomes evident that Eastern Africa, and particularly the Horn, continues to have political and security stakes for the Middle East powers despite their increasing interest in longer-term economic interaction. The current approach of the Arab countries in Eastern Africa is marked by key trends: still-existing Saudi worry about Iran, the tension between Saudi Arabia and UAE and Qatar, and the asymmetrical character, in terms of military and financial capacity, of the links between these countries and the African states. However, the Middle Eastern powers, largely oil and gas exports-driven economies, are becoming increasingly dependent on African states as productive and profitable investment destinations and trading partners, offering not only human and natural resources but long-term solutions for beneficial use of their financial wealth at the end of the petroleum era. This requires confronting and addressing the existing challenges in the Middle East - Africa relations which is necessary for building a culture of shared interaction on the basis of equality, mutual respect, and understanding.

A paradigm shift in the relationship between Eastern Africa and the Middle East

Contemporary geopolitical and economic developments and related strategic and security dynamics point to further intensification of interaction between states of the Middle East and those of Eastern Africa. This owes in part to the increasing strategic importance of Eastern Africa in the context of heightening super and regional power competition within which the middle and small powers also play an important role. The rapid increase of economic and political deals, however, characterizes what appears to be an increasingly close relationship between states that form one fluid and integrally connected political, economic, and cultural area but have been seen to belong to two geographically distinct regional security complexes (Cannon & Donelli, 2020, p. 1).

By and large, the coming together of economic, political, and military relations between states in the Arabian Peninsula and Eastern Africa has not been well understood (Verhoeven, 2018, pp. 333-334). While focusing on the ways in which key Middle Eastern states have sought to leverage the interests of great powers for their own objectives, and on how states and non-state actors have confronted each other domestically and transnationally, recent studies of the Horn of Africa have often failed to highlight the importance of social and longstanding cultural connections. In 2011, the Arab Spring led to a re-awakening among the countries of the Arabian Peninsula about the importance of Eastern Africa for their future stability. The Arab Spring had a significant political impact on the Maghreb and the Middle East as well as collateral consequences on the Horn of Africa with which the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt share security interdependence. The realization of the depth of interconnectedness fueled Saudi Arabia and the UAE to seek to regain a foothold particularly in Northeastern and the Horn of Africa where their rivals, Qatar and Turkey, were making headway. After the Iran nuclear deal, the Saudi leadership's principal fear again became Iran. This led the Saudis to develop strategic options in the Red Sea and prepare measures to protect its southern and western flanks. Consequently, the battle for access and influence in the region has intensified with the leading Gulf States, Turkey, and China, in particular, competing for a foothold in one of the world's most strategic regions. After years of relatively little interest in the countries that make up the Horn of Africa, for example, outside powers have now invested billions of dollars and the race for strategic military installations and ports (Gillon, 2019), as well as in economic competition for contracts in construction, logistics, communications, transport, and banking and service sectors.

This development, also inspired by security concerns related to the war in Yemen, has led particularly the Red Sea littoral countries, and Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa powerhouse, to intensify their efforts to gain financial and economic benefits from the leading Gulf States. The social and cultural connections, including through extensive migrant and diaspora communities, have also played an important role in furthering interaction. To invite Saudi and Emirati support, Eritrea, for example, expelled the long-standing Houthi presence in Asmara and allowed the UAE, a major partner in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, to establish a base in Assab in exchange for a financial and material endorsement. Eritrea was later alleged to have sent a military contingent to Yemen while Sudan, which suffered from an ailing economy also sought to cash in on the interest of particularly Saudi Arabia, supplied 7,000 paramilitaries in support of the Saudi coalition (de Waal, 2018). For Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir, and the subsequent

government since his fall in 2019, Saudi patronage has meant not only money but advocacy support in persuading the Americans to lift sanctions. Simultaneously the Sudanese government has jockeyed with Qatar and Turkey, as well as extra-regional powers such as Russia, to maximize economic benefits of the interest of the Middle East countries. Meanwhile, the UAE company DP World gained contracts to develop and manage ports in Berbera and Bosaso, located in the self-declared Republic of Somaliland and the Somali federal state of Puntland respectively. Saudis and Emiratis have also maintained a close political relationship with Egypt (de Waal, 2018).

The GCC dispute which unfolded principally between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and Qatar, was largely motivated by Saudi Arabia's attempt to curb Doha's regional influence. Turkey coming to Qatar's aid generated two competing coalitions which exported their competition to the African side of the Red Sea. In these circumstances, also considering diminishing US involvement during the Trump administration, Saudi Arabia, as the main regional power, began advancing its security doctrine involving initiatives such as the recently established Red Sea Council which sought to bring Red Sea states to a Saudi-led organization. Yet, it is the projection of competing visions of regional order by various aspiring regional hegemon – Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Iran, Turkey, and to some extent the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – that is recasting the geography of security in the broader region (Verhoeven, 2018, p. 334).

Although in early 2021 the GCC countries officially reconciled, the competition among them has continued to be a factor in their economic engagements and investment decisions in African countries. These developments show fluctuating emphasis and orientations in the Middle East-Horn of Africa relations. For example, while Sudan previously maintained good relations with Iran, Qatar, and Turkey, which have a tense relationship with Egypt for their support of religious, sectarian, and Islamic grassroots movements, such as the Shia doctrine and the Muslim Brotherhood, its current military leadership is close to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. Meanwhile, Ethiopia has been uncomfortable with Egypt's efforts to establish closer ties with its neighbors, and by taking the longer view it has improved its relationship with Turkey, Qatar, and Iran. Adding to the complexity is Ethiopia observing its close ally Somaliland entering into a port development and management and military base deal with the UAE, although Abu Dhabi eventually did not pursue the military base aspect of the agreement. However, Ethiopia and the UAE then developed closer ties while President Farmaajo's administration in Somalia, initially infuriated by the Somaliland-UAE cooperation (Mesfin, 2017), embraced Turkey and Qatar over its previous ally

the UAE which turned its support to the federal states over the central government. Yet, the incoming Hassan Sheikh administration has mended ties with the UAE and pursues an inclusive foreign policy that seeks to accommodate all main Middle East rivals. These efforts exemplify a new impetus for coming together among former rivals to build all-encompassing and mutually beneficial, instead of divisive, Eastern Africa - Middle East relations based on increasing equality and respect.

At the same time, economic imperatives have started to gain importance over military and security calculations in the Persian Gulf states' strategies towards Africa. End of the oil era inevitably edging closer, there has been a realization that the immense financial wealth would be better invested in productive and profitable economic ventures, such as successful enterprises, financial services, real estate, and food production, than in payments seeking to gain political influence. Currently, the volume of Middle Eastern investments across the African continent is increasing significantly, likely overtaking that of China, while becoming more and more focused on economic returns rather than strategic political influence (Horton, 2019). As the founder and director of the Botho Emerging Markets Group, Isaac Kwaku Fokuo Jr. commented, when we look at the Chinese 'New Silk Roads' (One Belt, One Road) project, we see that there is a great willingness on the part of the governments of the Emirates, China, and Africa to bring these three regions closer together" (Stenman, 2019). In the 6th Global Business Forum Africa, held on 13-14 October 2021 in Dubai, the increasing interest of the financially affluent Arab states in seeking partnerships with China to gain a further economic foothold in Africa was confirmed. African representatives present highlighted the importance of partnership with local players when Arab and Chinese investors approach Africa. Africa's tremendous prospective for further growth was recognized, while investment in profitable and necessary products and services, developing trade, and unleashing the potential of technology were seen as a key to not only African transformation but to its relationship with the Middle East as well (Global Business Forum Africa, 2021).

The fact that there is more political stability in much of Africa today, and that African countries are more technologically advanced than before, is building the trust and confidence of foreign investors. As Goolam Ballim, Chief Economist at the South African Standard Bank noted, "when you look at what's going on in Angola, South Africa, the stability of power in Kenya, there are new leaders, precursors who can chart a more constructive course for Africa" (Stenman, 2019). In addition, the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement (AfCFTA), which came into effect in January 2021 brings together 1.3 billion people in a US\$3.4 tril-

lion economic bloc of 54 African countries (Cochrane, 2021). In effect, the AfCFTA not only creates the largest common market for goods and services in the world but also opens new trade prospects for those with access to African markets (African Union, 2020).

Many African countries would like to follow the Dubai development model and create their own economic hubs. In 2018, UAE's non-oil exports and imports to Africa reached some €18 billion, with a large part of these products being supported by DP World which operates in seven African countries. The continent represents 10 percent of the global turnover of the port giant, a share that is increasing (Stenman, 2019). This underscores the fact that, in the last 6 years, while trade flows in the world remained stable or sometimes regressed, Middle Eastern states' trade with African countries increased significantly. For the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, especially, their presence in Africa presents a great opportunity to establish and implant real economic hubs through partnerships with local governments (Ash, 2020). This largely explains UAE's 2019 US\$2 billion investment for a tractor assembly line ("UAE Plans to Invest", 2019) and US\$600 million investment in a petroleum storage base in Angola ("UAE to Invest", 2019).

Several factors have served as incentives for the Arab countries and Turkey to massively invest in Africa. Firstly, increasing stability and China's central role in building Africa's infrastructure and housing has further stimulated urbanization that has created the conditions for safer and more viable investments in African capitals and key logistics locations. In the meantime, Africa has become the fastest urbanizing region of the world, preparing the continent to become one of the final frontiers of the fourth industrial revolution, merging the physical, digital, and biological worlds. Secondly, the prognosis made by the IMF in 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic, predicted that Africa overall was on its way to becoming a US\$5 trillion economy, with household consumption expected to increase at a 3.8 percent yearly to US\$2.1 trillion by 2025 (Shepard, 2019). While the pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have caused international instability, Africa's booming economic growth, in part driven by the evolving internal production and consumption, is likely to continue. Third, the announcement of China's "Belt and Road" initiative in 2013 was the opportunity for China to start lobbying for more recognition and partnership, as China became Africa's biggest trade partner, with a trading volume topping US\$200 billion a year (Shepard, 2019). The countries in the Middle East are interested in the Belt and Road Initiative, not only because of opportunities and direct economic spinoffs for those countries but also because it creates a conducive environment for further stability and eco-

conomic development in Africa, which in turn encourages more foreign investment and trade.

While the long-established political and security competition among Middle East powers remains active and aspects of it continue being exported to the African continent, the increasing volume of Middle Eastern investment, business activities, and trade across Africa has unlocked a new face of increasing economic cooperation. On top of the earlier, often expensive and difficult to reach political and security objectives, the search for investing in productive and profitable endeavors for better economic returns has increasingly taken hold. This has generated the need to build relationships based on long-term economic collaboration rather than short-term and often shifting, political and security calculations. As a result, the deeper economic engagement has arguably generated an increasing necessity to build relationships based on equality and mutual respect that in the long term should re-shape the still widespread attitude in the Arabian Peninsula that deems Africa as a cultureless periphery and Africans as the bottom of an Arab-centered social hierarchy. These views are based on the history of Arab exploration and slave trade and are still perpetuated by the exploitation and abuse of unskilled African migrant labor (Atong, Mayah & Odigie, 2018, p. 64; Olukya, 2021), require adjustment if the Persian Gulf states seek to benefit from their relations with Africa in the post-hydrocarbon era. Without developing an approach based on mutual respect and equality Middle Eastern engagements and economic ventures in rapidly developing Africa are likely to face an uphill struggle.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the intersections between the Middle East and Eastern Africa. It has explained how relations between the two regions are deeply founded in history and are a complex mix of intertwined political, economic, and cultural factors which have shaped them as fluid and interconnected spaces of ideational, social, and cultural exchange. As has been shown, the contemporary dynamics between the two regions have had important inter-state power asymmetries which have affected the political, economic, and cultural influences between the two regions. While in recent times state-based and related actors have largely been responsible for the spread of Middle East powers' influence in Eastern Africa, non-state actors, such as sizable African migration and diaspora communities in the Middle East have extended African presence but also at times served to maintain long-persisting views and attitudes towards Africa and its peoples.

In recent times, the so-called asymmetric relations, driven by political, security, and economic rivalry among Middle East powers, accompanied by persisting cultural perceptions and attitudes, appear to have been the order of the day in the relations between the two regions. The upsurge of relations especially after the Arab Spring was largely driven by political and security concerns and competition for influence among Persian Gulf states and Turkey. This competition came to be manifested particularly in the countries of the Horn of Africa which, in turn, have sought to benefit from the external involvement.

However, most recently, the Middle East - Eastern Africa relations appear to be moving more strongly towards economic imperatives. As discussed above, this largely owes to the Middle East hydrocarbon powers' realization that the era of petroleum, and to a lesser extent natural gas, is coming to an end. Increasingly stable, less conflictual, and rapidly developing Africa offers more secure investment opportunities than before which goes hand in hand with the Middle East powers' necessity to make their investments more economically sustainable and profitable in the long term. Spending on transactional and volatile political alignments and secondary security issues appears therefore to be losing ground to more economically sound investments, trade, and business partnerships in Africa.

As a result, a further movement towards increasing investments in productive and profitable endeavors driven by sound economic logic can be expected in the future. This, however, puts pressure on the more and more desperate Middle East powers to treat their African partners increasingly as equals and build mutual respect for the benefit of both parties. In this context, attitudes based on Arab-centric social hierarchy projecting disdain towards African cultures will have to gradually give way to relationships based on equality, understanding, and mutual respect. If such change does not occur, particularly in the attitudes of actors from the Persian Gulf states, Middle Eastern powers are likely to face growing obstacles and risk losing business when dealing with their increasingly empowered African counterparts. In the long term, this is likely to have economic repercussions in terms of investment opportunities and business access.

Finally, as our discussion in this article indicates, we believe that although the Middle East - Eastern Africa relations, founded in the rich history between the two regions, face a number of challenges arising from the still-persisting asymmetries and attitudes, the power difference is going to diminish in the future. This will necessitate Middle Eastern actors to adopt positions based on equal partnerships with Africans to ensure the economic success of their investments and business ventures. This is likely to facilitate more balanced interaction on an

increasingly equal standing despite the distinct traits of the players from the two different but deeply interconnected regions.

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