



The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa

Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°65

Abu Dhabi/Washington/Brussels, 6 November 2018

What's new? The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been expanding its role in the Horn of Africa. Along with other Gulf powers, it is broadening its ties to the region. Strategic rivalries, including those within the Gulf Cooperation Council pitting the UAE and Saudi Arabia against Qatar, often motivate Gulf powers' increasing influence.

Why does it matter? The influence of, and competition among, Gulf states could reshape Horn geopolitics. Gulf leaders can nudge their African counterparts toward peace; both the UAE and Saudi Arabia helped along the recent Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement. But rivalries among Gulf powers can also sow instability, as their spill-over into Somalia has done.

What should be done? The UAE, whose Horn presence is particularly pronounced, should build on its successful Eritrea-Ethiopia diplomacy. It should continue backing Eritrean-Ethiopian peace, encouraging both parties to fulfil their commitments. Abu Dhabi should heal its rift with the Somali government, and thus help calm tensions between Mogadishu and its peripheries.

I. Overview

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has emerged in recent months as an important protagonist in the Horn of Africa. Through political alliances, aid, investment, military base agreements and port contracts, it is expanding its influence in the region. A recent manifestation came in the summer of 2018, when Eritrea and Ethiopia announced – after a flurry of visits to and from Emirati officials – that they had reached an agreement to end their twenty-year war. Emirati and Saudi diplomacy and aid were pivotal to that deal. Elsewhere, however, Gulf countries have played a less constructive role. Competition between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, and Qatar on the other, spilled into Somalia beginning in late 2017, aggravating friction between Mogadishu and Somali regional leaders. Abu Dhabi's relations with the Somali government have collapsed. As its influence in the Horn grows, the UAE should build on its Eritrea-Ethiopia peace-making by continuing to underwrite and promote that deal, while at the same time looking to reconcile with the Somali government.

An array of calculations shapes the UAE's actions in the Horn. The Gulf port cities have a long history of ties with Africa, centred around maritime trade and dating to the era before the Emirates united as a nation-state. From 2011, however, Abu Dhabi began to look at the countries along the Red Sea coast as more than commercial part-

ners. Turmoil in the Middle East, Iran's growing regional influence, piracy emanating from Somalia and, from 2015, the war in Yemen combined to turn the corridor's stability into a core strategic interest. The 2017 Gulf crisis, which saw Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt cut ties with Qatar, pushed leaders on both sides of the divide to double down on their alliances, including in the Horn. Since then, the UAE has nailed down diplomatic relationships and extended its reach, particularly along the Red Sea.

In places, Gulf rivalries have been destabilising. In Somalia in particular, the UAE, perceiving the Somali government of President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed "Farmajo" as too close to Qatar and keen to protect years of investment, has deepened its relations with the governments of Somalia's regions, or federal states. Importing the Gulf crisis into Somalia has contributed to tensions between Mogadishu and the federal states that over recent months have threatened to boil over. Elsewhere, however, Abu Dhabi's peace-making is evident. The UAE, together with Saudi Arabia, provided critical diplomatic and financial support to help Eritrea and Ethiopia take the first steps toward a rapprochement that could prove enormously beneficial for wider Horn stability. Both Gulf monarchies also appear to have contributed to an easing of tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt.

The UAE, along with its fellow Gulf monarchies, is investing in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa for the long haul. Ideally, its successful Eritrea-Ethiopia diplomacy would provide the basis for that engagement. To that end, it should consider the following:

- ❑ Keep underwriting Eritrean-Ethiopian peace, including by releasing the aid it has promised and pressing Asmara and Addis Ababa to follow through on the September agreement they signed in Jeddah;
- ❑ Seek to end its debilitating spat with Mogadishu, with the understanding that warmer Abu Dhabi-Mogadishu relations are likely a prerequisite for overcoming divisions between President Farmajo's government and Somali regional leaders. The UAE could encourage allies in the regions to reconcile with Mogadishu and take steps to facilitate their doing so, for example pledging to inform Farmajo's government of its activities in the federal states, from training security forces to developing ports.

II. The UAE's Long Involvement in the Horn

When the Eritrean and Ethiopian leaders signed the September agreement, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's role in brokering it was in full view. The ceremony took place in Jeddah, on Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coast. The two African leaders sat in an opulent room under the gaze of a metres-high portrait of the founding Saudi king, Abdulaziz. The current king, Salman, looked on, flanked by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the Emirati foreign minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed. The traditional regional powerbrokers – Western countries, the UN and the African Union (AU) – were absent.

The Eritrean-Ethiopian rapprochement, as well as a flurry of other Horn of Africa diplomacy, has greatly boosted Gulf states' visibility as geopolitical actors along the

Red Sea. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are now central to conversations about the future of a region still suffering strife and instability. With Washington seemingly in retreat, the Gulf countries appear intent on playing a major role. As one Gulf official put it: “If you look at the future of Africa, it’s clear – China is in. The Arab countries are in. The U.S. is not”.¹ The larger questions are what each Gulf country aims to gain and how each intends to use its newly acquired leverage.

The UAE itself has a long track record of engagement across the Red Sea. It hosts large diasporas from Horn countries, some of which were integral to its founding in 1971. Arabic-speaking Sudanese civil servants helped build nascent ministries, and members of the diaspora still swap stories about how President Omar al-Bashir was once Khartoum’s military attaché in Abu Dhabi.² Dubai, meanwhile, is the banking hub for many Somali businesses.

The Emirates’ history as a trading coast also informs its contemporary economic outreach. The UAE’s model of economic diversification is built around its role as a logistics hub and regional headquarters. It is a model premised on freedom of maritime navigation, including through Bab al-Mandab, the narrow passage from the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea, and the Strait of Hormuz. Analysts often describe both bodies of water as chokepoints because they are easily closed to oil tankers and other cargo ships. Having cooperative, even like-minded governments along the Red Sea corridor is a strategic priority.³ Africa is also a natural theatre for trade and logistical ambitions. It comes as no surprise that one of the Dubai-based logistics giant DP World’s first contracts abroad was in Djibouti, where it began to develop Doraleh port in 2006.

III. The Arab Uprisings and a New Emirati Stance Abroad

The 2011 Arab uprisings vested the Red Sea with strategic importance for the UAE beyond core economic interests and led Abu Dhabi to view that corridor, as well as places as seemingly far-flung as Jordan and Libya, as its “neighbourhood”.⁴ Those uprisings transformed the Middle East from a zone of entrenched autocracies into a web of conflicts that political Islamists associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, whom the UAE and Saudi Arabia view as enemies, initially seemed to be winning. Abu Dhabi, in particular, views groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, which have traction inside the Emirates, as an existential threat. Their ascendancy as far away as North Africa alarmed the Emirates, particularly as conflicts across the Arab world increasingly appeared interlinked, with events in one place shaping those elsewhere.

A growing sense of danger bred a more interventionist foreign policy. The UAE, like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, funnelled support to allies in Libya, Egypt and elsewhere. To explain these actions to citizens at home – used to an economically focused UAE

¹ Crisis Group interview, analyst, UAE foreign ministry, Abu Dhabi, July 2018.

² Crisis Group interview, Sudanese academic, Abu Dhabi, June 2018.

³ A UAE senior official explained that Emirati interest in the Horn of Africa relates to the Emirati development model: “Even prior to our engagement in Yemen, a large part of our development was our logistical legacy. We are successful because of this”. Crisis Group interview, UAE senior official, Abu Dhabi, April 2018.

⁴ Crisis Group interview, Emirati academic, Abu Dhabi, October 2018.

– Emirati leaders invoked an argument still oft-repeated in policymaking hallways in Abu Dhabi: you can't be safe if your neighbourhood is at war.⁵

Egypt's future took on particular importance after its first democratic election in modern history brought a Muslim Brotherhood leader, Mohamed Morsi, to the presidency. After Morsi's ouster in a coup that the UAE and Saudi Arabia lauded and may have actively encouraged, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, together with Kuwait, poured billions into the new government's coffers.⁶ Abu Dhabi also kept a keen eye on the security of the Suez Canal, including when the scale of piracy in the Red Sea, the canal's southern gateway, jumped in the mid-2010s. Seeing a risk to its oil shipments and cargo containers, the UAE took an active role in counter-piracy initiatives. In Somalia, it trained a marine police force in the semi-autonomous region of Puntland and began experimenting with counter-terrorism operations against the Islamist Al Shabaab insurgency.⁷ The country became a Petri dish of learning for UAE special forces, which Western defence officials describe as the most capable in the Gulf today.⁸

IV. The Yemen Catalyst

By 2015, the tumult in the Middle East – the Islamic State's rise, Libya's collapse, the Syria inferno, instability in post-coup Egypt and fear at what some Gulf leaders saw as Iran's increasing influence across the region – created a siege mentality in some Gulf monarchies. In that context, Saudi Arabia and its primary partner the UAE led a military intervention in Yemen to roll back Huthi rebels loosely allied with Tehran. The Huthis had ousted the president and taken control of the capital and much of the country in late 2014 and early 2015.

In its anti-Iran drive, Riyadh sought assistance from past allies Sudan and Eritrea, both of which had strengthened ties with Tehran while all three countries were under international sanctions. Beginning in the 1990s, Sudan had built its defence industry with Iranian assistance and know-how; Eritrea had offered use of its port, Assab, to the Iranian navy. In 2014, however, both countries ejected Iranian diplomats. A year later, both agreed to contribute troops and resources for the Yemen war.

⁵ "Your prosperity as a country depends on the security of your region. It depends on your neighbours – not only yourself". Crisis Group interview, UAE foreign ministry official, Abu Dhabi, July 2018.

⁶ Dexter Filkins, "A Saudi prince's quest to remake the Middle East", *The New Yorker*, 9 April 2018.

⁷ A UAE foreign ministry official said: "We realised, when this epidemic of piracy started about ten years ago, that we had to be involved. But it was like Panadol – a temporary salve – to keep this passage safe and clear. We realised that the source of the threat was coming from land". Crisis Group interview, Abu Dhabi, October 2018. Early UAE-funded training of the Puntland marine police force was carried out in part by Saracen, a South African company, and then later by Dubai-based Sterling Corporate Services. Sterling did not deny its role, and complained it was singled out for criticism. Mark Mazetti and Eric Schmitt, "Private army formed to fight Somali pirates leaves troubled legacy", *The New York Times*, 4 October 2012. Local Puntland authorities openly acknowledged the use of private contractors. See Carol Huang, "Firms bid for contracts to fight pirates", *The National*, 20 April 2011; "Somalia: UAE confirms to continue supporting Puntland Troops", *Garowe*, 14 April 2018; "Somalia: Former PMPF director lauds UAE's support for Puntland", *Garowe*, 28 April 2018.

⁸ Crisis Group interview, U.S. administration official, Washington, August 2018.

At the outset of the Yemen conflict, the UAE and Saudi Arabia were alarmed by Huthi rebels' gains around Bab al-Mandab, raising the possibility that an Iranian-allied group would control such a chokepoint. They prioritised retaking Yemen's western and southern coastlines.⁹ The UAE took de facto responsibility for operations in Yemen's south and quickly found itself in need of a naval and air base along the Red Sea. The natural candidate was Djibouti, where DP World had built the port. By then, however, Abu Dhabi's relationship with Djibouti was souring over allegations of corruption related to DP World's contract (DP World disputes the allegations).¹⁰ Officials from the two countries had a falling-out in April 2015, when the UAE, with DP World's infrastructure, sought to use Djibouti as a military launching pad into Yemen.

The Saudi-led coalition turned to another port, Eritrea's Assab. Riyadh signed a security agreement also that April to use Assab, leaving Abu Dhabi to carry out the deal's terms. By September, the Emirati military was flying fighter-bombers from the Eritrean coastline.

The dispute with Djibouti left the UAE uneasy about its reach along the Red Sea corridor. Abu Dhabi worried that it could not rely on allies in the Horn – even in cases where it felt existential questions were at stake.¹¹ As UAE-backed Yemeni forces pushed northward along the Red Sea coast, Abu Dhabi sought to expand its strategic depth. DP World and the Emirati military each penned an agreement to develop Berbera port in the self-declared republic of Somaliland. A subsidiary of DP World later signed a contract with local authorities in the Somali federal state of Puntland to develop Bosaso port. The attitude, as one Emirati official put it, became “fill space, before others do”.¹²

V. The Intra-Gulf Crisis

The June 2017 Gulf crisis brought yet more urgency to the scramble along the Red Sea corridor. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt cut ties with and imposed an embargo on Qatar.

Among the reasons the UAE in particular cited for breaking ties with Qatar was Doha's alleged betrayal of the Saudi-led coalition efforts in Yemen.¹³ The Qataris had sent few personnel to the war theatre, but Abu Dhabi accused them of having revealed the location of a UAE-led operation to al-Qaeda, resulting in Emirati casualties, though they provided no evidence to support that allegation. (Qatar at the time declined to respond to this specific claim, and urged the UAE to provide evidence.¹⁴)

⁹ A senior Saudi diplomat said that the Huthi presence around Bab al-Mandab “made us very serious about controlling the Red Sea coast. We should not leave this for any militia. We have to protect it from Iran, the Huthis and any militia”. Crisis Group interview, Riyadh, October 2018.

¹⁰ DP World has long disputed the allegations and, when Djibouti later sought to cancel the contract, brought the case to the London Court of International Arbitration. The Court ruled in favour of DP World on two occasions, most recently on 2 August 2018.

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, UAE senior official, Abu Dhabi, April 2018.

¹² Ibid.; Crisis Group interview, UAE foreign ministry official, Abu Dhabi, July 2018.

¹³ Omar Saif Ghobash, UAE ambassador to Russia, interviewed on BBC “Hardtalk”, 20 July 2017.

¹⁴ “UAE claims meddling by Qatar led to al-Qaeda attack in Yemen”, *Middle East Eye*, 20 July 2017.

After they imposed an air and naval blockade on Yemen, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi continued to claim that Doha was working actively against Saudi-led efforts, particularly through the media.

Also at the outset of the Gulf crisis, both sides began a frantic diplomatic push to secure allies, including among countries in Africa. In the Horn, competition was particularly fraught, given this subregion's strategic value and proximity to Yemen. Djibouti and Eritrea both issued statements of support for the Saudi alliance, prompting Qatar to withdraw 400 observers it had stationed to monitor a border dispute between the two.¹⁵

In Somalia, Farmajo, who had assumed office only months before the Gulf crisis, reportedly faced intense Saudi and Emirati pressure to cut ties with Doha. Although the president insisted that he wanted to remain neutral, for Abu Dhabi, widespread reports that he had received Qatari funds before his election belied that claim, as did his post-election appointment as chief aide of a former Al Jazeera correspondent with links to Doha.¹⁶ In April 2018, Somali authorities seized from a UAE plane almost \$10 million in cash that Abu Dhabi said was intended to fund training of security forces that had long been underway but which Mogadishu alleged would be used to fund its political rivals.¹⁷

In the aftermath of the spat, Abu Dhabi withdrew some officials from Mogadishu, evacuated a military training camp and shuttered a hospital.¹⁸ The UAE also shored up its alliances with leaders in Somalia's federal states and the breakaway republic of Somaliland. It stuck to previous port agreements in Berbera and Bosaso, as well as a military base agreement for Berbera, and reportedly is discussing the development of Kismayo, in Jubbaland federal state, over the Somali federal government's objections.¹⁹ The Gulf powers' backing of rival factions – notably Emirati support for the governments of Somalia's federal states and Qatari support for Farmajo – has exacerbated existing tensions between Mogadishu and the regions to the point of near-conflict.²⁰

The dust-up in Mogadishu is often described by officials in Abu Dhabi as a “wake-up call” – the most blaring signal that the UAE's interests were imperilled along the African side of the Red Sea.²¹ For Abu Dhabi, the timing was inauspicious as well. Emirati-backed Yemeni forces had been gearing up for an offensive to move toward the Huthi-controlled port of Hodeida – an operation that was to rely heavily on assets parked across the sea in Assab. If past alliances with Djibouti and Somalia could turn

¹⁵ See Crisis Group Commentary, “A Dangerous Gulf in the Horn: How the Inter-Arab Crisis is Fuelling Regional Tensions”, 3 August 2017.

¹⁶ Other presidential candidates allegedly also received foreign funds from Gulf and other countries. See Crisis Group, *Somalia and the Gulf Crisis*, op. cit.

¹⁷ “UAE denounces seizure of cash and plane in Somalia”, Reuters, 10 April 2018.

¹⁸ “UAE shuts Mogadishu hospital amid tension with Somali government”, Al Jazeera, 15 April 2018.

¹⁹ “Berbera and Bosaso port deals at stake as Somali Parliament bans DP World”, Goobjoog News, 12 March 2018; Matina Stevis-Gridneff, “Middle East power struggle plays out on new stage”, *Wall Street Journal*, 1 June 2018; Eleonora Ardemagni, “Gulf Powers: Maritime Rivalry in the Western Indian Ocean”, Institute for International Political Studies (Italy), 13 April 2018.

²⁰ Crisis Group, *Somalia and the Gulf Crisis*, op. cit.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, UAE foreign ministry officials, Abu Dhabi, June, July and October 2018.

on a dime, perhaps other seemingly assured relationships – such as with Eritrea – could do so, too.²²

VI. The Ethiopia-Eritrea Peace Deal

As the UAE's relations with the Somali federal government soured, a new prime minister emerged in Ethiopia whose reformist economic views appealed to Abu Dhabi.²³ Both countries had already begun laying the groundwork for closer ties some years ago. In March 2013, the two agreed to form a joint commission to discuss economic, political and other cooperation.²⁴ In April 2018, the selection by Ethiopia's ruling coalition of a new and charismatic prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, paired with Abu Dhabi's desire for a new partner in the Horn, catalysed a quicker alignment. As Abiy spoke of privatisation and development to unleash the potential of the Horn's most populous country, the UAE saw a strategic and investment opportunity. Among the many constraints on Ethiopia's growth has been its lack of sea access and consequent reliance on Djibouti as the sole outlet for its exports.²⁵ The UAE's newly signed port contracts could help. In March 2018, DP World announced that Addis Ababa would take a 19 per cent stake in the Berbera port's development.²⁶

Now, with an energetic partner and a cornucopia of potential commercial opportunities lying in wait in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia, Abu Dhabi launched a series of meetings and mutual delegations in a bid to forge strong ties with Abiy. Abu Dhabi's and Riyadh's relationships with Eritrea positioned them well to help facilitate rapprochement between Asmara and Addis Ababa, once leaders in those capitals were ready. Abu Dhabi pledged \$3 billion to Ethiopia, an amount that puts the country on par with Egypt as a recipient of UAE assistance. The two Gulf countries assured Eritrea, meanwhile, that they would help lobby for the lifting of international sanctions in the coming months.²⁷ If sanctions go, Assab – which has been modernised for military sorties but not for container ships – will almost certainly be the next port to go to market for commercial development.

As seen from the Gulf, the Ethiopia-Eritrea peace deal has both economic and strategic layers. Amid the UAE's strategic setbacks in Djibouti and Somalia, the Ethiopia-Eritrea deal in many ways cements Abu Dhabi's role as a player in Horn politics. In the weeks since the agreement was announced, Ethiopia's prime minister also has helped spearhead efforts to improve relations with Somalia, which may in turn help smooth the rough patch between Mogadishu and Abu Dhabi – though for now little suggests rapprochement will come any time soon.

Both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh also appear to have helped behind the scenes Prime Minister Abiy's efforts to improve relations with Egypt, another old foe. Abiy visited

²² “We realised that we cannot keep betting on our relationship with Somalia. We need to diversify and hedge our bets”. Crisis Group interview, UAE foreign ministry official, Abu Dhabi, June 2018.

²³ Crisis Group interview, UAE foreign ministry official, Abu Dhabi, October 2018.

²⁴ See “Ethiopia welcomes stronger ties with UAE”, *Gulf News*, 22 March 2013.

²⁵ Crisis Group phone interview, DP World official, September 2018.

²⁶ *Ibid.* “Ethiopia Acquires 19% Stake in DP World Berbera Port”, DP World press release, 1 March 2018.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, diplomat posted to Asmara, October 2018.

Cairo in June and publicly reassured Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi that Ethiopian development projects – notably the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which Egypt fears could severely curtail its supply of Nile water – would not harm Egypt. Sisi has also taken a conciliatory approach, saying he recognises that there is no military solution to the dispute.²⁸ At the same time, Saudi Arabia has helped start a dialogue between Eritrea and Djibouti over a decade-long border conflict.²⁹ Though that dialogue is still in its early days, after an initial meeting between the two countries' leaders in Jeddah in September 2018, Djiboutian President Ismail Omar Guelleh told Saudi media that relations had “entered the normalisation phase”.³⁰ In a sense, both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh are creating facts on the ground in the Horn. In the process, they are becoming forces that cannot easily be ignored.

The payoff could be enormous for regional integration, infrastructure development and connectivity across the Red Sea. Just with regard to ports, the Horn remains one of the most underserved areas of the world relative to population, with a single modern multi-use deep-water port at Doraleh, in Djibouti.

Yet because competition with adversaries also drives the push into the Horn, risks are at least as prominent as opportunities. The contrast between the roles played by the Gulf powers in Ethiopia and Somalia is instructive. At one moment, Gulf involvement in the Horn, even if motivated in part by rivalry between two Middle East axes, can move things in the right direction, as it has with Abiy's push for peace with Eritrea. At another, those same rivalries can destabilise and divide.

VII. Conclusion

The UAE signals repeatedly that its engagement with Africa is here to stay. In 2018, it is opening an additional six embassies on the continent, adding to the more than a dozen already there. As one Emirati official put it: “We need to diversify and strengthen our relationships outside our own region. If we only pay attention to the Middle East and North Africa, we will be bogged down in crisis. We could miss a lot of opportunities around the globe”.³¹

While credit for the Ethiopia-Eritrea deal lies primarily with the leaders of those two countries, clearly Gulf powers, especially the UAE, played an important role in

²⁸ According to one UAE foreign ministry official: “We think the relationship is already better. Sisi is trying to develop Egypt in a way that doesn't create new enemies. He's working in cooperation especially with the Gulf, UAE and Saudi Arabia. ... The Egyptian government is managing this relationship with Ethiopia and easing tensions. It's good to keep them engaged so that they can all find some sort of better deal”. Crisis Group interview, Abu Dhabi, October 2018. Although tensions have eased and the sides no longer trade public threats over the Nile waters dispute, there remains considerable mutual suspicion, while the substantive issues at the core of the dispute – Ethiopia's desire for development and expanded use of the Nile waters symbolised by the GERD and Egypt's concerns about access to water and security of supply – remain far from resolved. Crisis Group interviews, Egyptian and Ethiopian government officials, Addis Ababa and Cairo, August-September 2018.

²⁹ “Djibouti-Eritrea, they have met for the first time and we hope that this will be the start of a positive dialogue to resolve their issues”. Crisis Group interview, Saudi academic, Riyadh, October 2018.

³⁰ Fatah Arahman Youssef, “President of Djibouti: Saudi Arabia helped us open a new page with Eritrea”, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 25 September 2018.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, UAE foreign ministry official, June 2018.

helping push forward the initial steps of a rapprochement that could be significant across the Horn. The deal demonstrated that the UAE and Saudi Arabia can play important peace-making roles. Abu Dhabi and its peers can encourage regional economic integration and help give leaders in the Horn the extra boost, including both political and financial support, they might need to make peace. Such was the story of Eritrea and Ethiopia – two countries that saw domestic interests in making peace but needed the right economic and diplomatic assurances from abroad.³²

The months ahead will be crucial for the success of that deal. Abiy faces enormous hurdles in his quest to reform the economy and consolidate political support. Eritrea's reopening to the world will undoubtedly encounter unexpected challenges. For the Jeddah deal to succeed, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi will need to work proactively to keep the parties on track. They can begin by promptly following through on their aid commitments.³³

Yet despite the bright spot of Eritrea-Ethiopia peace-making, intra-Gulf competition colours Emirati involvement across the Horn. Whether the killing of Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Arabia's Istanbul consulate will lead to some form of rapprochement within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), as some reports suggest might happen, remains unclear.³⁴ But even if so, the Saudi-UAE alliance is still likely to view actors such as Qatar and Turkey as competitors in strategic theatres like the Horn. Moreover, while for now Tehran's influence is largely limited to the Yemeni side of the Red Sea, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's engagement in the Horn is likely to remain informed by their determination to ensure Iran does not regain a foothold, including by winning back its former allies Sudan and Eritrea.³⁵

The damage that external rivalries can inflict on the Horn was made clear in Somalia, where friction among Gulf powers, and in turn between the UAE and Farmajo's government, has exacerbated pre-existing tension over how power and resources are divvied up between the capital and the regions. Abu Dhabi says that it wants a stable Somalia, but the country is likely to remain volatile unless strong Emirati ties to Somali regional leaders are paired with a reconciled UAE relationship with Mogadishu. Abu Dhabi could pledge to inform Farmajo's government of its activities in the federal states – whether training security forces or developing ports – and ensure that its investment and aid benefit the country and not only its regions. The UAE also might encourage its allies in the federal states to repair their own ties to Mogadishu.

Abu Dhabi faces a choice in how much its Middle Eastern rivalries shape its Horn engagement. If competition remains a primary driver, results will almost certainly be

³² A UAE foreign ministry official said: "The will is there. It just needs activation". Crisis Group interview, Abu Dhabi, October 2018. Also Crisis Group interviews, Horn of Africa regional analysts, Nairobi, September 2018.

³³ The UAE's \$3 billion in pledged support to Ethiopia was earmarked in June, under the authority of the Abu Dhabi Fund. An initial \$1 billion has been deposited with the Ethiopian Central Bank, while \$2 billion is intended for economic projects and investments that have yet to be announced. No pledge of economic assistance to Eritrea, meanwhile, has been made public.

³⁴ In his first public appearance since Khashoggi's killing, on 24 October 2018, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman outlined ambitions to see greater regional integration that includes Qatar. "Saudi prince praises Qatar's economy in surprising shift", Bloomberg, 24 October 2018.

³⁵ "For now, Sudan is not in the Iran camp but we have to be vigilant to make sure this remains the case". Crisis Group interview, Saudi official, Washington, August 2018.

mixed. In some places the UAE may still help bridge divides, even if partly motivated by shoring up its own influence at the expense of rivals. Elsewhere, however, competition could put Horn governments in a difficult spot, forcing them to choose between the two Gulf axes or exacerbating local conflicts in new ways. Ultimately, zero-sum competition in the Horn risks upsetting both the internal politics of the region's diverse states and the balance of power among those states. Outside powers may win short-term gains, but over time everyone stands to lose from greater Horn instability.

Abu Dhabi/Washington/Brussels, 6 November 2018

Appendix A: Map of the Horn of Africa





International Crisis Group

Headquarters

Avenue Louise 149, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38. Fax: +32 2 502 50 38

brussels@crisisgroup.org

New York Office

newyork@crisisgroup.org

Washington Office

washington@crisisgroup.org

London Office

london@crisisgroup.org

Regional Offices and Field Representation

Crisis Group also operates out of over 25 locations in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Latin America.

See www.crisisgroup.org for details

PREVENTING WAR. SHAPING PEACE.