The Horn of Africa is undergoing unprecedented turbulence as political crises ripple through the region. The upheaval has cast attention yet again on the interventions of Gulf states and their allies in the Horn. This report outlines the nature and implications of Gulf soft power on Horn countries, and the opportunities and limits it presents for promoting peace, security and development.
Key findings

- Soft power is increasingly a key element of foreign policy in the Horn of Africa as small, wealthy nations recognise their hard power limitations.
- Major policymakers in the Horn are yet to demonstrate a greater understanding and value of the soft power of Gulf actors. Conventional war and coercive power is still alive in the Horn and weak institutions and economies of the region lend themselves to the clientelist tendencies of some Gulf actors.
- The effects of Gulf Arab states’ soft power in the Horn remain marginal. Soft power is however difficult to measure and its influence often overestimated, especially as it relates to cultural affinities.
- Gulf Arab states resist collaborating with regional bodies and states in the Horn also prefer bilateral relations.
- Fragmented global relations are mirrored across the Horn as erosion of the rules-based international order pushes boundaries and diminishes global norms.
- While Western countries remain key actors in the Horn, they are facing increasing competition from Gulf countries. The agency of local actors in navigating often diverging foreign interests will matter more in the next years.
- To address the Horn’s challenges, an astute understanding of developments in both the region and the Gulf states and their allies is of critical importance.

Recommendations

Horn of Africa countries:
- Leaders must focus on long-term strategic goals centred on national interests. They should embrace policies that promote political stability and security to attract sustainable investments and partnerships.
- Governments need to create the conditions necessary to attract investment from Gulf Arab states.
- Leaders should invest in image branding, promoting available resources and investment opportunities.
- Governments should diversify their economies to reduce reliance on the Gulf, which enables the unbalanced nature of their relationships.

Gulf states:
- Countries should contribute to the well-being of Horn citizens, especially in wealth creation, and target investments to benefit the youth.
- Governments should collaborate to counter potential destabilisation in the Horn.
- Partnerships with the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development should be deepened. Agreements should strive for transparency and accountability in direct investment, political agreements, and security cooperation with the Horn.

Other significant actors:
- International partners should deepen diplomacy and dialogue with Gulf Arab states, building on a common interest in stabilising the Horn and Red Sea arena.
- Increase engagements to avert the risk of conflict. The United States specifically needs to leverage its wide-ranging assets to curtail rivalries in the Horn.
- International partners should collaborate with the countries in the Horn to support their state-building, peace and security efforts.
Background

The Horn of Africa is undergoing unprecedented turbulence as political crises ripple through the region, threatening the unravelling of the region’s hegemon, Ethiopia, and the potential collapse of Sudan’s perilous transition. While regional and international efforts are underway to stem the conflicts, the political upheaval has cast attention yet again on the interventions of Gulf states and their allies in the Horn.

In recent decades, the Horn has witnessed increased engagement by Gulf states. Although the geopolitics of the region have long been interlinked with those of the Gulf, recent jockeying for influence in the region between Gulf states and other actors has had far-reaching consequences. Leveraging several tools at their disposal, the efforts of Gulf states to build influence in the Horn has resulted in a mix of failures and successes. The longstanding rivalries between Gulf states and their allies related to their spaces of influence has led to a worsening of existing conflicts and generated new tensions within the Horn.

There is a need to understand how this is shaping the political climate in the region. This report seeks to explore the nature and implications of Gulf soft power on the countries in the Horn. Specifically, it examines the opportunities and limits of harnessing soft power to promote peace, security and development.

Introduction

Over the last years, stability in the Horn of Africa region (the Horn) has been affected by a combination of intra-state conflicts (Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan) and inter-state tensions (Ethiopia-Sudan and to a lesser extent Kenya-Somalia).

The eruption of a civil war between the government led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) has put an end to relative stability in Ethiopia that prevailed since the 1990s following the demise of the Dergue regime. Sudan continues to live through a protracted transition characterised by the attempts of the military to reassert its power in a contested political space that followed the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir.

Somalia has completed a tumultuous and protracted electoral process that resulted in the election of former President Hassan Sheikh Mahamud. At the same time, al-Shabaab remains an enduring nation- and region-wide security threat, despite the presence of the African Union (AU) mission.

In general, the inherent fragility of the region, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, has dramatically influenced the political and security dynamics. With complex political transitions in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia and the re-emergence of Eritrea as a regional voice with strong links to some Gulf states, the Horn is undergoing a challenging period.

The efforts of Gulf states to build influence in the Horn has resulted in a mix of failures and successes

In contrast, despite the crisis among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, those states have enjoyed relative economic and political stability. Further, Gulf states’ diplomacy has increasingly been on the rise around the world in line with their ambitions to advance their role in international affairs. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and their allies have been increasingly involved in the Horn region with various failures and successes over the recent decades. Through different commercial, political, and military ties with several African states, Gulf states have increased their footprint in the region through the leveraging of various instruments of soft power with mixed outcomes.

The report aims to understand the relations between Gulf states and Horn states. The report examines the historical relations between the countries of both the Gulf and the Horn. In addition, discussions delve into the key contextual developments in the Gulf that would affect relations with the Horn and the specific nature of the relations between some Gulf states and Horn countries.

It also compares the approaches adopted by the Gulf states and the impact of their use of soft power. It projects future scenarios concerning soft power strategies and their impact on peace, security, and development, highlighting key findings and
recommendations that can be harnessed from the Gulf engagements and investments in the Horn.

This report argues that the impact of Gulf states’ soft power in the Horn has been marginal. It appears that Horn countries have been able to pursue their strategic interests whether they align with Gulf states’ interests or not. The aggressive foreign policies of the Gulf Arab states in pursuit of their national interests has continued to undermine their soft power resources. These policies are also perceived to lack coherent underlying principles to be truly effective.

This report adopted a qualitative approach and relied on an extensive desk review to aid a comprehensive analysis of Gulf soft power and identify literature gaps. The widely reported and extensive literature on the political dimensions in the Horn as they relate to the Gulf provided a solid foundation. It was followed by interviews with key respondents from both regions. A hybrid approach was adopted for the respondent interviews, entailing face-to-face and telephonic interviews.

**Meaning of soft power**

Soft power is considered a critical element of foreign policy. The American political scientist Joseph Nye coined the concept in his 1990 book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. Nye, who served as a senior official in both the US state and defense departments, believed that...
sources such as culture, political ideals, and policies, when communicated smartly, could direct the decisions of other states without the need for brute military force or economic might.9

Soft power is, therefore, in the realm of ideas and values. It refers to the ability to attract other parties to shape, rather than coercively change, how they perceive and understand their own interests as well as their understanding of what should matter to them. However, as discussed in extensive literature, hard resources remain crucial in determining the effectiveness of soft power even as it shapes the preferences of other states’ interests.10

Various attempts to measure soft power have been made to mainstream the concept, including a study commissioned by the British Council titled Soft Power Today, Measuring the Influences and Effects. The study proposed a framework that measured soft power outcomes against four key indicators: ‘the number of incoming international students, number of international tourists, incoming foreign direct investment, and the political influence of a nation measured against the United Nations General Assembly voting’.11

Meanwhile, The Soft Power 30 Index,12 that last provided the top 30 global rankings in 2019, used a complex framework made up of six objective data categories and eight polling data categories. Objective data categories included ratings of government, education, and culture, while the polling data categories analysed cuisine, technology, and foreign policy, among other categories. The most up-to-date index is the Global Soft Power Index developed by Brand Finance that lists the world’s top 100 soft power nations. In its 2021 report, the index sampled 75 000 people and 750 specialists from over 100 countries and measured soft power ‘under three main headings – Familiarity, Reputation, and Influence – and based on the seven Soft Power ‘Pillars’ of Business & Trade; Governance; International Relations; Culture & Heritage; Media & Communication; Education & Science; and People & Values.’13

Notably, all the Gulf states and their allies considered in this paper made it to the top 50 of this index, with the UAE scoring highest and ranked in 17th place, an indicator of their active internationalism. Gulf states have different reasons for their proactive pursuit of international soft power. For the UAE and Qatar, it is commonly held that their soft power push is linked to overcoming their ‘smallness’ and safeguarding their security interests in a rough neighbourhood.14 The need to diversify economies that are heavily reliant on hydrocarbon resources is also among key Gulf state drivers.15

In the Horn region, Gulf states and their allies leverage their shared history, culture, and Islamic values to expand their influence, advance their interests and outwit competitors. The values the two regions share are expected to enhance the probability that the Gulf will obtain the desired outcomes in the Horn. The holy cities of Mecca and Medina form the greatest soft power resource for Saudi Arabia as well as the Islamic cultural language.16 Cultural transmission in generating soft power uses commerce, personal contacts, visits, and overseas education exchanges between both regions.

**Gulf states have leveraged on shared history, culture and Islamic values to influence their interests and outwit competitors**

Furthermore, the Gulf states and their allies have specifically used development, humanitarian, and cultural diplomacy as key features of their soft power projection in the Horn. The humanitarian aid support to the Horn was previously associated with Islamic charities but has more recently been integrated into the global humanitarian architecture.17 Since the 1970s, Gulf Arab states have been the most significant contributors to humanitarian and development aid, especially to Muslim majority countries. Saudi Arabia’s International Islamic Relief Organization was the largest Islamic charity in the 1990s as a vehicle of the kingdom’s pan-Islamic policy. The shift to integrate with international humanitarian aid structures was informed by the scrutiny of Islamic charities that followed the 9/11 attacks and other shifts in foreign policy.18

**Historical pull vs present-day realities**

Despite being separated by the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, the Horn and the Gulf Arab states share a
complex history that spans centuries and pre-dates the Westphalian order. From the first Muslim hijrah – the early religious migration in 650 AD – to the more recent history of the Arab slave trade off the Indian Ocean coast traced back to the 25th century BC, their shared history cemented economic, political, cultural, and religious relations, however imbalanced.

European colonisation in the 19th century on both sides of the Red Sea balanced the relations somewhat, but the ‘first oil shock’ in 1973 that led to the rise in global oil prices dramatically changed fortunes for the Gulf Arab states almost overnight. Armed with economic might, the Gulf states’ asymmetrical relationship with the Horn started deepening. Over the next two decades, the relationship was characterised first by Cold War alliances that rooted extraversion and dependency followed by Gulf state disengagement owing to regime change and state collapse in the Horn (Ethiopia and Somalia) and the rise of political Islam (Sudan).

Due to its geostrategic and geopolitical location, the Horn is historically susceptible to regional and great power competition

At the turn of the century, the rising threat of Islamic terrorism and piracy off the coast of Somalia underlined the strategic importance of the Horn for global security, especially as the US engaged in its global war on terrorism. This shaped the foreign policies of the Gulf states. Therefore, the present-day imbalances of power between the Horn of Africa and Gulf Arab states can be traced to their shared history and remain apparent in the policies that the Gulf states apply to the Horn. Despite being a common migration destination, the Gulf’s strict migration policies perceived as discriminatory result in regular waves of expulsion and employment nationalism. Contributing to the tense relations is the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Horn is a complex subregion with a history of conflict and rivalry as all the countries of the Horn have experienced armed conflict at some point since the early 1960s. The Horn is considered an ‘over-armed and under-financed’ subregion characterised by weak economies prone to development interdependencies.

At the same time, the economic performance of the Horn over the past decade alludes to its true economic potential, with Ethiopia and Djibouti recording the highest per capita growth rates. Due to its geostrategic and geopolitical location, the Horn is historically susceptible to regional and great power competition. The constant and complex matrix of interests that interplay makes it difficult to discern the nuances of interactions between local, international, and regional players. The centuries-old links between the Horn and the Arabian Peninsula have encompassed trade and cultural exchanges.

Due to the subregions’ proximity to the Arabian Peninsula, natural cultural affiliations are not just religion-based. Proponents of regionalism who lump the Gulf and the Horn together as one region have argued that the narrow strip of water connects rather than divides, considering the Horn as an organic extension of the Gulf. Citing the propensity for events on either side of the Red Sea to affect the other, proponents posit that the region functions as a common political and security arena.

The Red Sea is also an ancient trade crossing and is currently the busiest maritime migration route for African migrants using the eastern migration corridor. Today, 13% of world trade flows through the waterways off the coast of the Horn, representing one of the world’s strategic maritime chokepoints. The region’s proximity to one of the world’s busiest shipping lanes and inherent security challenges posed by inter-state conflict, piracy, and terrorism initially attracted international interest and intense competition.

Why the Horn of Africa?

Gulf states’ engagement in the region is by no means a new phenomenon but has increased over the last decade. The Horn of Africa is one of the more significant strategic priorities for the Gulf states and their allies. These priorities include Gulf investments in long-term food security, countering Iran’s influence, and developing humanitarian and development sectors.

For Gulf states and their allies, the geostrategic position of the Horn represents a lucrative block of allies from a security point of view. The Gulf powers have engaged in
an unhealthy rivalry while seeking to project geopolitical influence and pursuing regional order in an unstable and conflict-prone neighbourhood. This has been outwardly manifested in the securitisation of the Horn, with the Gulf joining in the race to invest in military facilities and logistics hubs.\(^{34}\)

These large-scale investments are part of the Gulf states’ bigger aspirations to reshape the regional order and establish themselves as global actors. Bolstered by declining US interest in the region, the Gulf Arab states have since engaged in a contest for dominance and influence over the Horn.\(^{35}\) For instance, the involvement of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement was viewed as a case in point, where some Gulf states are seemingly subcontracted to deal with the political intricacies of the Horn. This view prevailed during the presidency of Donald Trump but the Biden administration appeared to have followed a different approach, as evidenced by the appointment of a Special Envoy for the Horn.\(^{36}\)

It is often argued that the intensification of competition by Gulf states is related to Iran’s footing in the region, though Iran’s influence has waned.\(^{37}\) The GCC crisis in 2017 and the subsequent economic and political blockade of Qatar by the other members of the cooperation due to Doha’s support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its allyship with Turkey also served as a cause for Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to strengthen their presence in the Horn to minimise the influence of Qatar and Turkey.\(^{38}\)

New security threats along the Red Sea also alerted the Gulf states to the risks emanating from their western flank.\(^{39}\) The 2014 outbreak of war in Yemen complicated the security of the Red Sea, prompting the intervention of regional powers. Yemen, backed by a Saudi-led military coalition, has been battling Houthi rebels who have been supported by Iran. The conflict in Yemen has contributed to the militarisation of the Red Sea.

As the Gulf states pay closer attention to their western flank, they also have been compelled to pay significant attention to the politics of the Horn to edge out Iran and other adversaries.\(^{40}\) Gulf states’ engagement in the Horn is therefore also seen as part of their wider strategy for regime survival, dictated by their own internal security considerations. This is also supported by the perceived threat posed by the Muslim Brotherhood to Gulf states’ rulers, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE.\(^{41}\) Piracy, terrorism, irregular migration, and weapon smuggling also constitute threats originating from both the Horn of Africa and Yemen.

The engagement of Saudi Arabia and the UAE is also driven by an economic agenda that takes different forms, such as infrastructural investments in ports, energy, and agriculture. This would be a crucial part of their strategic objective to diversify economically to reduce their reliance on revenues from oil and gas.\(^{42}\)

**Increased competition by Gulf states is associated with Iran’s footing in the region, though its perceived influence has waned**

Among the Gulf states, the UAE caught on early on the need to develop port infrastructures to serve the largest economy of the Horn, Ethiopia. Through Dubai Ports World (DP World), the UAE has meshed its foreign policy with its commercial entities.

In Somalia, for example, DP World’s entry into the north of Somalia coincided with Djibouti’s termination of its contract with DP World to run its Doraleh Container Terminal and the UAE’s worsening relations with the Federal Government in Mogadishu. DP World redeployed its efforts from Djibouti to investments in Berbera and Bosaso, even as political leaders in Mogadishu protested.\(^{43}\)

The acquisition of the Bosaso port by a DP World’s sister company has not delivered significant advancements. However, in Somaliland, the Berbera port rebuilding is progressing well, the Berbera International Airport has been inaugurated, and work on the Berbera-Wajale corridor looks promising.\(^{44}\) The investments highlight the extent the UAE would go to achieve strategic interests, at times to the detriment of the nascent state-building processes in Somalia and deepening state fragmentation. The UAE has been central to the weakening relations between Mogadishu and its federal member states.\(^{45}\)
Gulf soft power in action

The Gulf Arab states and their allies have adopted soft power mechanisms in their engagements with the Horn. This move has increased the significance and visibility of the Gulf Arab states and their allies as they project transformative images of themselves across the Horn. The softer and less quantifiable approach taken by Gulf Arab states and their allies is, however, less understood as they assert political and economic influence by leveraging their established cultural and economic ties with the Horn.

The Gulf states use an Islamic soft power approach through cultural cooperation, humanitarian, and developmental assistance. The Gulf states’ soft power approaches are in search of longer-term institutional stability for their economies as nations compete to carve out niches in the Horn. Broadly speaking, their soft power rests on their unique position in the Islamic religion, affordance of hard cash without accountability, and mediation steeped in dollar diplomacy. At the same time, Gulf states also apply their hard power – including military aid and economic support – conjointly with the projection of soft power resources to achieve maximum effects.

The 10 years since the Arab Spring broke out have been characterised by ‘Samsonite diplomacy,’ proxy wars, and support for militias on both shores of the Red Sea. While access to hard cash with few bureaucratic hurdles seemingly endeared some Gulf states to some countries in the Horn, the effects have been fleeting. Especially as the effects of the ‘no strings attached policy’ came to bear on the more fragile nations such as Somalia and Sudan, following the Gulf Crisis.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia’s central soft power resource is its Islamic character as the birthplace of the Islamic faith. The two holiest sites in Islam, the Holy Mosques, are also located within the kingdom. The kingdom’s foreign policy professes Islam as the official ideology and promotes pan-Islamism. Such foreign policy positioning was not necessarily a deliberate exercise of soft power by Saudi Arabia but rather fulfilling its responsibility as custodian of the Islamic holy sites.

In the Horn, Saudi Arabia leverages the principle of Islamic solidarity whenever seeking support for positions, particularly those related to Iran. In that sense, Riyadh leverages religious soft power to counter Iranian influence and is, therefore, an expression of geopolitics. The Muslim majority countries of the Horn have found themselves compelled to support the kingdom with few exceptions.

Saudi Arabia also practices Islamic humanitarianism as an essential element of its foreign policy. This is achieved mainly through charitable organisations and private foundations that incorporate Dawa or proselytisation with aid, relief, and social services worldwide. Saudi Arabia also provides scholarships to undertake Islamic studies in Medina. Further, besides providing financial aid to countries in the Horn, Riyadh focuses on Sudan and Ethiopia for agricultural investment and animal production as part of the kingdom’s food security initiative.

Since the Arab Spring broke out, the past 10 years have been characterised by ‘Samsonite diplomacy’ proxy wars

Saudi Arabia is also involved in mediation efforts in the Horn, having facilitated the normalising of relations between Djibouti and Eritrea. These relations are still frail and the border dispute between the two countries remains unresolved – hence the commonly held claim that Gulf mediation efforts address short-term objectives.

The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) also sought Saudi Arabia’s intervention to resolve its dispute with the UAE. Somalia and the UAE came to loggerheads when the UAE was engaging with the Federal Member States without necessarily engaging the FGS. Riyadh also partnered with the UAE in the successful Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement, an indicator of the Gulf states’ positive role in stabilising the Horn. Meanwhile, forceful repatriations of immigrants back to their countries of origin in the Horn continue to undermine Saudi Arabia’s soft power.

United Arab Emirates

The UAE tops all other Gulf states in its drive for global image and level of influence. Soft power is fast becoming a central element of the UAE’s foreign policy, with the creation of a Soft Power Council indicating the UAE’s public diplomacy strategy.
Soft power ties in with the strategies that aim to transform the Emirates’ oil economy. Central to this strategy is the UAE’s financial sector. The UAE has implemented cross-cutting reforms over the past decades to develop this sector into one of the world’s leading financial hubs, with well-developed infrastructure and the best business-friendly environment in the Gulf.

The UAE has also focused on diversifying its economies by investing in regional trade hubs. This has achieved the second objective of restricting the sphere of influence for adversaries such as Iran. Initially linked to the Horn of Africa through strong trade ties, the UAE has expanded its influence into the geopolitical realm, emerging as a major player through chequebook diplomacy, aid, and investments. The UAE has also adopted religious soft power strategies in the Horn, hosting international associations of Islamic scholars and other Islamic gatherings.

Out of the countries in the Horn, the UAE currently exerts the most influence in Sudan. In addition to cultural proximity and religious ties, Abu Dhabi has long supported the Sudanese government through investments and financial support worth billions of dollars. Sudan’s history of Islamic revolution and close connections with Tehran motivated the UAE and Saudi Arabia to maintain links and ensure Sudan stays within their fold.

UAE’s growing influence is unfolding side by side with waning Western influence on the Horn. This is most evident in Sudan. The current crisis in Sudan exposes the international community’s reliance on Abu Dhabi’s influence on the Transitional Military Council to reinstitute Sudan’s transitional arrangements. According to a Western diplomat, Sudan persevered despite a 30-year international sanctions regime, and therefore they could not easily succumb to the threat of sanctions and aid suspension.

As the West’s grip on the Horn wanes, the UAE’s chequebook diplomacy, aid and investments have seen its influence in the region growing.

Probably motivated by the risks to its soft power, the UAE is engaged in global attempts to reinstitute the transitional arrangements in Sudan, despite its partiality to dealings with the military. UAE is hoping to replicate the success of brokering the historic peace accord between Ethiopia and Eritrea in July 2018, jointly with Saudi Arabia. Mediation is the latest tool in the UAE soft power toolkit to leverage its influence in an effort to protect long-term commercial and strategic interests.

However, while the mediation efforts by the UAE and Saudi Arabia were successful between Ethiopia and Eritrea, domestically, the consequence of the rapprochement has been disastrous, with many analysts citing its implication for the onset of the Tigray war. The UAE has not exercised soft power entirely and has reportedly provided extensive military support,
furnishing the Federal Government of Ethiopia with drones and weapons.60

Despite UAE’s success in diplomatic mediation in support of its interests, Abu Dhabi has been less successful in building relationships at the community level. The UAE has been unsuccessful in the contest for the hearts and minds of the local population in the Horn.61

Qatar

Qatar’s soft policy approach is informed by its independent foreign policy that seeks to project its independence from Riyadh while protecting the tiny but wealthy Gulf Arab state.Nested between two regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, Qatar balances relations in an insecure region rife with rivalries. Its environment and limited hard power options have largely defined its assertive identity.

With an estimated total military personnel of 17,000, the oil-rich nation, therefore, leans on its economic might and soft power policies to establish itself as a key player in the region. To protect itself from persistent regional threats in the Gulf, Qatar hosts several US forward bases vital to US military operations in the region.62 The bases serve the soft power purpose of cementing Qatar’s brand as a key regional player and Western ally.

Globally, Qatar’s most recognisable soft power resource is the Al Jazeera Network. Founded in 1996, a year after the peaceful coup d’état by Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani against his father, the channel has evolved into a global media network that broadcasts to over 270 million viewers through more than 10 channels and languages.63 The network is central to Qatar’s state branding initiatives and has enhanced the country’s global profile. Al Jazeera’s coverage of the 2011 Arab Spring and its strong support for the Arab revolutions gained notoriety and public support but aggravated the ruling elite in most Arab nations.64

Qatar’s soft power policies in the Horn are modest compared to its Gulf neighbours. However, Doha has capitalised on state-led mediation as another expression of soft power, registering some successes and increasing its influence globally as well as in the Horn. ‘Mediating disputes between conflicting parties to achieve peaceful resolutions’ is the priority of Qatar’s stated foreign policy.65

Qatar began its foray in mediating conflicts in Yemen and Lebanon before moving on to the Horn of Africa. Qatar facilitated discussions between Khartoum and rebel groups in Darfur in 2008 before successfully mediating the 2010 border conflict between Eritrea and Djibouti, effectively solidifying its reputation as an ‘honest and neutral broker’.66 More recently, Qatar was credited with restoring diplomatic relations between Somalia and Kenya that deteriorated over a maritime border row.67 There are also early reports of possible Qatari mediation efforts between factions in Sudan.68

GCC harmony and possible ramifications

The stability and security of the Red Sea area has long been of global interest, particularly given its geostrategic position and the crucial role Gulf states play in the international energy markets. However, the unprecedented turbulence among the GCC in the last decade has highlighted the emergence of a new political landscape in the Gulf, with two distinct blocs within what was heretofore viewed inaccurately as a generally homogeneous bloc.69

Nonetheless, with the recent trend of de-escalation, it appears that the main powers are showing signs of exhaustion, with the economic effects of COVID-19 and the high domestic cost of their interventionist policies being felt at home. A decidedly more pragmatic approach is emerging, with the key players now seeking dialogue and diplomacy.70

Further, as Gulf states diversify their economies and wean their countries off oil and gas revenues, there is a growing need to tighten their belts and spend less on defence and interventionist policies.

Collaboration on peace, security and development

The Gulf Arab states have recently redoubled their efforts to solidify their position as influential peace and power brokers in the Horn, particularly where regional bodies have had little success. Conversely, these efforts have been marred by the widely held position that intra-Gulf rivalries have largely contributed to the instability of the already fragile region.

The Gulf Arab states have preferred to engage bilaterally with countries in the Horn and mostly sidestepped
multilateral organisations like the AU and the IGAD. This is most evident in the case of the historic 2018 Peace Agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia were involved in the negotiations that culminated in the two countries’ leaders signing the ‘Jeddah Peace’ agreement, putting an end to over two decades of war. The agreement was negotiated in the absence of both the AU and IGAD.

Shortly after that, Riyadh successfully facilitated the normalisation of relations between regional rivals, Djibouti and Eritrea, to resolve their longstanding border dispute. This came after Djibouti had petitioned both the United Nations and the AU to facilitate an agreement between the two countries. More recently, the 2020 formation of the Red Sea Alliance led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt again outpaced efforts by the AU and IGAD following the 2019 establishment of an IGAD task force on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

IGAD has made slow strides in responding to the challenges and opportunities in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden arena

Although these engagements have primarily been executed bilaterally, Gulf states have in the past shown interest and initiative towards partnership with regional bodies belonging to the Africa-Arab Cooperation, exemplifying one such strategic inter-regional initiative. In 2015, an AU high-level delegation led by the then AU Commissioner for Peace and Security Smail Chergui, which undertook visits to Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE, indicating a rising interest in cooperation. During the visits, the AU delegation met with ministers and high-ranking government officials to discuss peace and security developments and seek partnerships to resolve ongoing crises and future concerns. The respective Gulf states and the AU agreed to expedite the signing of memoranda of understanding in peace and security to enhance their support of the AU Peace and Security agenda.

Despite these and similar commitments, progress on this front has been slow. Similar engagement by the AU High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) for Sudan, South Sudan and the Horn of Africa has borne little fruit beyond initial engagements. The goal of AUHIP is to bring the multitude of stakeholders, including the Gulf Arab states, to agree on a joint approach to the challenges facing the Horn.

IGAD likewise has made some slow strides towards responding to the challenges and opportunities in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden arena. The IGAD task force on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden has been operational since 2019. It engaged in national consultative meetings between 2019 and 2020 to draft a common IGAD position, regional plan of action and convention on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The outcomes from the national consultative meetings were only validated in July 2021 during the 4th Session of the IGAD Special Task Force.

The regional bodies have also been guilty of holding the Gulf actors at arm’s length. Officials have described their apprehension towards the involvement of Gulf states and their allies, particularly in resolving conflicts. An AU official expressed concern with the changing positions within Gulf states as well as between the AU and the Gulf states on the current crises in the Horn, saying ‘As the AU we are tempted to say stay away’.

Undoubtedly, the Horn would benefit far more from cooperation than competition, given the unrest created by the intense power competition between regional rivals. Engagement through multilateral organisations like the AU and IGAD would be in the best interests of the Horn countries. It would serve to balance the asymmetrical relations with the Gulf states while also providing the Gulf states with an avenue to deepen their diplomacy and serve their strategic interests. However, this depends on the reform of these regional organisations to be swifter and more effective in brokering peace and security in the Horn.

Conclusion

The widely-held belief that ‘conventional war is dead’ seems to be currently contested. At one level, states, including small and wealthy nations, have leveraged their soft power as a key element of their foreign policy. At the same time, inter-state and intra-state wars have resurfaced, an indication that conventional war and coercive power are still alive globally, as the Russian-
Ukraine war illustrates. The Horn of Africa is reflective of these contending trends, where the soft power of Gulf states has limited currency.

The effects of Gulf Arab states’ soft power on the Horn of Africa states remain marginal. Most of the governments of the Horn resist participatory processes involving the wider community that potentially creates relationships, which are conducive for soft power to wield real influence. In addition, as soft power is difficult to measure, its influence is overestimated, especially as it relates to cultural affinities. This passage from Rivals in the Gulf by David H Warren aptly captures such contested notions around major sources of the soft power of the Gulf states, especially cultural affinities:

On the one hand, the Gulf states are more accessible as migrant destinations, particularly for women. Nevertheless, positive views are countered by a very negative image of the Gulf as an uncivilised place of arrogant and immoral hypocrites, and ruthless exploitation of workers, and a distaste for khaljana, or the ‘Gulfization’ of wider Arab culture.

The fragile institutions, economies, and political situation of some of the Horn countries also lend themselves to clientelism. This makes actors in the Horn prone to more coercive influence than to the appeal of the soft power of Gulf states.

Regional cooperation is the answer to peace and stability and boosting economic trade, creating a fertile ground of optimum utilisation of the soft power of Gulf states. Yet, Gulf states and their allies continue to resist collaborating with regional bodies in their engagements with countries in the Horn. This challenge will continue to frustrate the long-term resolution of the challenges of the Horn.

Moreover, the inability of regional bodies to step up to the plate is also indicative of the role of member states who prefer to participate in bilateral relations. This will continue to limit the collective mechanisms, and thus there is a need for serious and deliberate re-examination of the regional bodies, their member states, and multilateral organs that cover the Horn.

The Horn is not unique in this regard. It mirrors the fragmentation of the global political order. The current crises in the region denote a turbulent transition in the international order. Events in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia all reflect the erosion of the rules-based international order, which nurtures effective use of the soft power of nations.

Meanwhile, in the Gulf, shifting alliances have begun to emerge simultaneously with the waning influence of the West in the Horn. Further, the changing socio-economic environment in the Gulf, notably the imperative for diversifying their economic base, will continue to influence their focus and approaches in the Horn and beyond.

Because soft power is difficult to measure, its influence is overestimated, especially regarding cultural affinities.

To address the challenges of the Horn seriously and comprehensively, an acute understanding of the dynamics of both the Horn and those of the Gulf states and their allies is integral. There have been fundamental shifts that have occurred on both sides of the Red Sea and globally, including shifting power alliances, political crises, and economic turbulence. And more importantly, there is a need to better understand the interrelatedness between the Horn and the Gulf to enhance cooperation and collaboration for informed utilisation of the soft power of the Gulf actors.

**Recommendations**

**For the Horn of Africa states**

- In their engagements with the Gulf, leaders of the countries in the Horn must adjust their approaches, focusing on long-term strategic goals centred on their national interests rather than short-term objectives of regime security. These strategies should include leveraging their geostrategic significance to balance asymmetrical Gulf relationships.

- Countries of the Horn must strive to establish political stability and security to attract long-term investment and partnerships from diverse partners. This will include genuine efforts to attain good governance through the rule of law, public accountability, and respect for human rights, to name a few.
• In the context of declining oil revenues, governments in the Horn should proactively strive to create the conditions necessary to attract substantial investment from Gulf Arab states and their allies.

• Also, as Gulf Arab states refocus on economic diversification and seek reliable partners to address their food security, the governments of the Horn of Africa countries should invest in image branding that promotes the available resources and investment opportunities in their countries.

• Diversifying the Horn economies to reduce their reliance on the Gulf would also be necessary to offset the unbalanced nature of the Gulf and the Horn of Africa relationships.

For the Gulf states

• Gulf states continue to play a significant role in the political landscape of the Horn, given their proximity and their long historical and cultural ties in the region. Gulf Arab states should be encouraged to adopt longer-term strategies in their engagements going forward.

• Following the limitation of their ‘Samsonite diplomacy’, Gulf states should change their approach towards contributing to long-lasting relations to the well-being of the citizens of the Horn by prioritising wealth creation and making them part of the process to ensure the sustainability of their efforts.

• Given their common security risks and the linked fortunes between the Gulf and the Horn of Africa, the Gulf states should aggressively strive to collaborate to counter potential destabilisation implications of some of their engagements in the Horn.

• The Gulf Arab states and their allies must recognise the importance of changing demographics in the countries of the Horn, specifically the growing youthful populations, and target their investments to benefit this largely untapped resource.

• Gulf Arab states should deepen partnerships with the AU and IGAD, including supporting the reforms of these institutions to enhance their capacity and credibility in leading peace and security efforts in the region.

• Gulf Arab states should also strive for transparency and accountability in direct investment, political agreements, and security cooperation with the Horn, given the high stakes for stability in the region.

For other key actors

• International partners should enhance and deepen diplomacy and dialogue with the Gulf Arab states, finding common ground on their shared interest in stability in the Horn and Red Sea arena. This will facilitate a more effective engagement and opportunities for synergy between the Gulf and other partners.

• As the Horn will remain a theatre of great power competition, at least in the foreseeable future, international partners should deepen their engagement to avert the risk of conflict. The US specifically should proactively leverage its diplomacy and assets to curtail rivalries in the Horn, given its relationships and military footprint in the region.

• Finally, to counter the real threat of Gulf states imposing their political, economic, and security visions on Horn countries in the long run, international partners should support countries in the Horn in their state-building, peace, and security efforts.
Notes

1 The most accepted definition of the Horn of Africa comprising Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan is adopted, n.d.
2 The Gulf States and Their Allies Refer to Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, n.d.
3 For the purpose of this report, the Horn of Africa region comprises Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan.
6 ‘Despite fiscal buffers, the oil price plunge of 2014-2016 affected all GCC countries that are heavily reliant on oil revenue.’ n.d.; FH M A Al-Marri, The Impact of the Oil Crisis on Security and Foreign Policy in GCC Countries: Case Studies of Qatar, KSA and UAE, Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 2017, 21.
8 Ibid, 1–2.
10 The working definition of soft power remains elusive; there is a distinction between sources and resources of soft power. More importantly, to this day the literature on the concept has done little to narrow down which activities this loose concept encompasses. E Wilson III, Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power, The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 616: 1, 2008, 120–22.
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