

Research Briefing

18 April 2024

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The Horn of Africa and the Red Sea

Summary

- 1 Recent developments in the Horn of Africa
- 2 Regional relations and tensions
- 3 Humanitarian issues
- 4 The Gulf States and the Horn of Africa
- 5 China and the Horn of Africa

Number

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Summary

In recent years there have been significant changes in the political and security make-up of the Horn of Africa. New leaders have prompted a redrawing of political allegiances across the region. Localised conflicts have resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians and the displacement of thousands more. Millions of people face acute food insecurity. The Yemeni-based Houthi attacks on shipping transiting the Bab al-Mandab Strait has also focused attention on the Red Sea as a geostrategic space.

This briefing surveys recent political developments in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan. For the purposes of this paper the term Horn of Africa is used to collectively refer to just these countries, unless otherwise stated.¹ Some of the challenges facing these countries, either collectively or individually, are identified, as are potential flashpoints. The role of the Arab Gulf States and China are also explored.

Significant changes in recent years

Since 2018 there have been significant changes in the political and security make-up of the Horn of Africa.

Djibouti

Current Red Sea tensions caused by the Houthis in Yemen have drawn attention to Djibouti's hosting of multiple foreign militaries. The US, China and France all have naval bases in the small country, with other militaries also having a presence. The UK opened an embassy in 2021.

Eritrea

President Isaias Afwerki has been in charge of the one-party state since 1993. Unexpected rapprochement with Ethiopia in 2018 saw Eritrea contribute troops to Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's subsequent conflict with Tigrayan forces in Ethiopia's northern region that borders Eritrea.

¹ Other uses of the Horn of Africa may exclude Sudan, or may include South Sudan, Kenya and Uganda, reflecting the membership of the regional grouping IGAD.

Ethiopia

Prime Minister Abiy, in power since 2018, has overseen the restoration of relations with neighbouring Eritrea, initiated and ended a two-year conflict in the northern region of Tigray, and led his new political party to a landslide election victory in 2021. However, lower-level violence continues in parts of the Amhara and Oromia regions. Prime Minister Abiy's agreement with the self-declared Republic of Somaliland, whose independence is not recognised by Somalia or any other country, for Ethiopian access to the coast has led to a deterioration of the relationship between Ethiopia and Somalia.

Somalia

Somalia's President Hassam Sheikh Mohamud, elected in 2022, has set a deadline of the end of 2024 to expel the Islamist militant group al-Shabaab. The group, linked to Al-Qaeda, has been in conflict with the Somali government since 2006. The African Union peacekeeping force, ATMIS, is gradually withdrawing all of its troops in 2024.

Sudan

The removal of President Omar al-Bashir, one of Africa's longest-serving authoritarian leaders, after months of popular protest in 2019 ushered in the hope of a transition to democracy and a civilian-led government. However, since April 2023 the country has been in the grip of a conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and a paramilitary group known as the Rapid Support Forces. The US Secretary of State says both sides have committed war crimes.² A UK-drafted UN Security Council resolution is calling for unhindered humanitarian access and to end the fighting.³

Involvement of the Gulf States

The involvement of the Arab Gulf States in the Horn of Africa, in particular Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has noticeably grown in recent years. Their interest has been prompted in part by investment opportunities (in agriculture, natural resources and consumer markets) and the growing importance of the Red Sea as a geostrategic space. Regional experts suggest tensions between the Gulf States is starting to play out in the Horn.

China increases diplomatic engagement

The creation of a special envoy for the Horn of Africa in February 2022 reflects China's growing interest and involvement in the region. China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017 and has invested

² US State Department, [War Crimes, Crimes Against Humanity, and Ethnic Cleansing Determination in Sudan](#), 6 December 2023

³ [UN Security Council resolution 2724](#), 8 March 2024

heavily in infrastructure projects both there and in Ethiopia. A senior Chinese official has described the Horn of Africa as having “geographically strategic importance, abundant resources and enormous potential.”⁴ China hosted a peace conference in Addis Ababa in 2022, and the special envoy signalled China’s desire to “play a role in area of security.”⁵

IGAD activity

IGAD, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), is a regional grouping of eight East African states: Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda. At recent summits it has expressed concern about recent tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia, and called for an unconditional ceasefire in Sudan.

Potential flashpoints

Relations between Ethiopia and Somalia are in flux following the agreement between Ethiopia and the self-declared Republic of Somaliland allowing Ethiopia access to its coast.

The ongoing civil war in Sudan may continue to destabilise the region, with thousands displaced internally and across its borders. External support for some armed actors raises fears of proxy wars. Alex De Waal, the Executive Director of the World Peace Foundation, says “Sudan has become a cockpit in which the rising powers of the Middle East seek to project their power and gain an advantage over their rivals.”⁶

Disruption to trade, increases in food and fuel prices and possible oil spills are some of the potential impact the situation in the Red Sea may have for the countries bordering the sea and the Gulf of Aden.⁷

Many people face hunger

In parts of the Horn, many people face acute food insecurity, a situation exacerbated by short-term violence and insecurity, and the longer-term effects of climate change. Over 50 million people in the wider region are food insecure, experiencing crisis levels of acute food insecurity, according to

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, [Ambassador Ma Xinmin Publishes Article Titled New Blueprint for Peace and Development in the Horn of Africa on Brown Land](#), 6 April 2022

⁵ [Beijing seeks mediator role in turbulent Horn of Africa](#), Voice of America, 30 June 2022

⁶ Alex de Waal, [Sudan is collapsing – here’s how to stop it](#), The World Today, 2 February 2024

⁷ Institute for Security Studies, [Africa’s oceans could pay dearly for the Red Sea crisis](#), 1 February 2024; [East Africa braces for further rise in food, fuel prices over Red Sea crisis](#), The East African, 4 February 2024

the World Health Organisation.⁸ Senior UN officials are warning “famine is now a real and dangerous possibility in the months ahead” in Sudan.⁹

Refugees and internally displaced persons

Conflict and environmental shocks in parts of the region has caused the displacement of millions of people in and around the Horn in recent years. This has also been linked to incidents of conflict-related sexual violence, with cases reported during recent fighting in Ethiopia and Sudan.

The International Organisation for Migration says the current conflict in Sudan has made it the “largest internal displacement crisis in the world.”¹⁰ More than 8 million people, or about 15% of the population, have fled their homes in the country.¹¹

UK Government approach

The UK Government is calling for an “immediate and sustainable ceasefire and a return to a civilian-led democratic transition” in Sudan, and for civilians in Amhara and Oromia regions in Ethiopia to be protected.¹² Following a visit to Ethiopia in early February 2024, the Minister for Development and Africa, Andrew Mitchell, said the UK is setting up a pledging conference and a contact group in Ethiopia.¹³

Relevant Commons Library briefings

A 2008 paper [Interlocking crises in the Horn of Africa](#) provides detailed profiles of Somalia, Somaliland and Puntland, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Eritrea before looking at some of the root causes of tensions, including clan, ethnicity and environmental insecurity. In 2011 the Library briefly [reviewed events in the Horn](#). More recent Library briefings are highlighted at relevant points.

⁸ WHO, [Situation report: Greater Horn of Africa Food Insecurity and Health Grade 3 Emergency 1 November to 31 December 2023](#), 20 February 2024

⁹ [The crisis in Sudan necessitates urgent action](#), Al Jazeera, 14 April 2024

¹⁰ IOM, [Sudan faces world’s largest internal displacement crisis](#), 16 October 2023

¹¹ UN OCHA, [Sudan situation report](#), 23 February 2024

¹² FCDO, [UN Human Rights Council 55: UK Statement for Item 2 General Debate](#), 4 March 2024

¹³ [HC Deb 12 March 2024 c150](#)

Map of the Horn of Africa



The dotted line shows the provisional administrative line. The boundaries shown on this map do not imply endorsement by the House of Commons Library.

1 Recent developments in the Horn of Africa

This section surveys recent political developments in the Horn of Africa. Humanitarian issues across the region are discussed in section 3.

1.1 Djibouti

Political leadership

President Ismaël Omar Guelleh was re-elected in April 2021 for a fifth time with 98% of the vote. Guelleh has been in power in since 1999 and the main opposition boycotted the vote, leaving only one challenger, who alleged the outcome was the “result of ballot-box stuffing.”¹⁴ This may have been Guelleh’s last election; while a 2010 constitutional reform scrapped term limits, allowing Guelleh to run for a third term, it did introduce an age limit of 75. Guelleh is now aged 76.

Djibouti has remained largely stable under Guelleh, but restrictions on press freedom and dissent remain a live issue. Freedom House, a US-based NGO that assesses countries on political rights and civil liberties, rates Djibouti as Not Free, describes the opposition’s ability to operate as “severely constrained”, and says journalists and activists who criticise Guelleh or the ruling party are “regularly harassed or arrested.”¹⁵

The UK drew attention to the need for a fully inclusive political process at Djibouti’s [Universal Periodic Review](#) in 2018.¹⁶ Much of the population live in the capital, Djibouti city.

Strategic location

Djibouti’s small size belies its importance in the region. Lying on the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, it sits at the gateway to the Red Sea and on to the Suez Canal, one of the world’s busiest maritime trade routes.

¹⁴ “[Djibouti’s President Guelleh wins fifth term with 97 per cent of votes](#)”, Reuters, 10 April 2021

¹⁵ Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2023: Djibouti](#), March 2023 (accessed 6 February 2024)

¹⁶ FCDO, [Universal Periodic Review 30: Djibouti](#), 18 May 2018. The [Universal Periodic Review](#) is a process used by the United Nations Human Rights Council for every Member State to undergo a regular peer review of its human right record.

France, the US and China have all established significant military bases in the country, attracted by its location at the entrance to the Red Sea the access it offers to the Indian Ocean, and the territorial closeness to the Arabian peninsula. Japan and Italy also have a military presence in Djibouti.¹⁷

The military presence, in a country of only one million, brings economic benefits. However, as the International Institute for Strategic Studies points out, this makes Djibouti reliant on its access to the sea and great power interests: “Djibouti’s entire economy and influence rely on its port - the main entry point for Ethiopia’s maritime trade – and the international bases it hosts”.¹⁸

UK embassy opened in 2021

The UK opened a new Embassy in Djibouti in March 2021. The Foreign Secretary announced the move in October 2018 with a view, pre-pandemic, to opening the embassy by the end of March 2020.

For Djibouti’s Universal Period Review in 2023, the UK called on Djibouti to continue working on combating human trafficking, female genital mutilation, and champion girls’ education.¹⁹

1.2

Eritrea

Political leadership

President Isaias Afwerki is the longest-serving ruler in the Horn of Africa and has governed Eritrea ever since it became independent from Ethiopia in 1993. The country has not held a national election since then, and the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice is the sole political party. Freedom House gives Eritrea one of its lowest scores, with no political freedom or independent media, and describes it as a “militarised authoritarian state.”²⁰

Eritrea has been described as wielding an “outsize influence” in the Horn because of the President’s willingness to use his military to “project power outside his borders.”²¹ The Economist newspaper has observed: “the

¹⁷ “The new geopolitics of the Red Sea: why is interest in the region resurging?”, IISS Strategic Survey 2020, p286-287

¹⁸ As above, p281

¹⁹ FCDO, [44th Universal Periodic Review of human rights: UK statement on Djibouti](#), 13 November 2023

²⁰ Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2023: Eritrea](#), March 2023

²¹ [Eritrean dictator emerges as Horn of Africa’s biggest winner after Ethiopian war](#), The Globe and Mail, 16 January 2023; see also Alex de Waal, [The despotism of Isaias Afewerki](#), the Baffler, 2 September 2022

secretiveness of Isaias' regime spawns endless speculation about his intentions."²²

Human rights

The lack of human rights in Eritrea remains a serious concern and has been raised by British MPs. A report in May 2021 by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation in Eritrea, Dr Mohamed Abdelsalem Babiker, explained some of the human rights challenges: "Eritrea has not yet put in place an institutional and legal framework to uphold minimum human rights standards in a democratic society."²³

No international journalists are accredited to the country and internet access is severely restricted. Eritrea is [ranked last in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index](#) published by Reporters sans Frontiers. In March 2021 the EU [imposed sanctions on Eritrea](#) for serious violations of human rights under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions regime.²⁴

The FCDO designates Eritrea as a Human Rights Priority Country. The FCDO identified as some its main concerns arbitrary detention, violations of freedom of expression and of freedom of religion or belief, and the indefinite nature of the national service system.²⁵

1.3

Ethiopia

Political leadership

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has been in office since 2018. Appointed initially by the then ruling party, Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), he led his new Prosperity party to a landslide victory in a general election in June 2021.²⁶ That election was overshadowed by the then ongoing conflict in Tigray and a partial opposition boycott.²⁷

²² "Eritrea's President Issaias Afwerki bids for regional greatness; Eritrea's war", *The Economist*, 22 May 2021

²³ "[Situation of human rights in Eritrea](#)", Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation in Eritrea, 12 May 2021, A/HRC/47/21

²⁴ The EU listed the National Security Office which it described as "responsible for serious human rights violations in Eritrea including arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances of persons and "torture committed by its agents." "[EU imposes further sanctions over serious violations of human rights around the world](#)", Council of the EU, 22 March 2021; [Official Journal of the EU](#), vol 64, 22 March 2021, L 99 I

²⁵ [Human Rights and Democracy: 2022 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office report](#), CP 886, 13 July 2023

²⁶ Commons Library Insight, [Ethiopia charts a new course under Abiy Ahmed – but challenges remain](#), 26 September 2018; Commons Library briefing, [Humanitarian situation in Tigray](#), 2 September 2021

²⁷ [Ethiopia: Abiy's Prosperity party wins landslide election victory](#), Al Jazeera, 10 July 2021

Internal insecurity

The implementation of the Pretoria peace agreement between the Ethiopian Government and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front that ended the two-year war in the northern region in November 2022 remains slow and fragile. In February 2024, tensions emerged over the return of internally displaced persons to their homes in Tigray, and the resolution of disputed areas along the Tigray region's borders with the Amhara region and neighbouring Eritrea.²⁸ The African Union (AU) hosted a strategic reflection meeting on the implementation of the Pretoria agreement (formally known as the cessation of hostilities agreement) in early March 2024.²⁹ Afterwards, the UK, in a joint statement with other G7 countries and the EU, recognised the progress made so far and urged all parties to implement the agreement in full.³⁰

Following a visit to Ethiopia in early February 2024, the Minister for Development and Africa, Andrew Mitchell, announced a new humanitarian aid programme and further support for the Tigray region.³¹ He has also said the UK is setting up a pledging conference and a contact group on Ethiopia.³² The UK co-chaired a pledging conference for the Horn of Africa that raised £1.9 billion in May 2023.³³

Abiy also faces uprisings in two other populous and powerful regions: Oromia and Amhara.

The federal Government is in conflict with the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) in the Oromia region, which has long-sought autonomy and self-determination for the Oromo people and whom the federal parliament has designated a terrorist organisation.³⁴

Abiy declared a state of emergency in Amhara in August 2023 following armed opposition to his plans to absorb regional security forces into the federal army and a federal crackdown on a local militia force known as Fano.³⁵ The conflict in the region is now reaching a tipping point, argue two

²⁸ Briefing: Ethiopian government, Tigray region feud over peace deal implementation, BBC Monitoring, 6 February 2024

²⁹ African Union, [Statement of the Chairperson of the AUC H.E. Moussa Faki Mahamat on the occasion of the 1st Strategic Reflection on the Implementation of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement](#), 11 March 2024

³⁰ UK in Ethiopia (@UKinEthiopia), X (Twitter), 13 March 2024 (accessed 26 March 2024)

³¹ FCDO, [UN announces £100 million of new aid for over 3 million vulnerable people in Ethiopia as humanitarian crisis deepens](#), 5 February 2024

³² [HC Deb 12 March 2024 c150](#)

³³ HL9061 [[Tigray: Peace negotiations](#)], 20 July 2023

³⁴ Further analysis of the Oromia conflict is available from Marew Abebe Salemot, [Ethiopia's peace pacts with the Oromo Liberation Front have failed: here's what was missing](#), The Conversation, 20 February 2024 Africa Report, [Ethiopia's Oromia region at risk of full-blown conflict amid stalled negotiations for peace](#), 17 May 2023; Human Rights Watch, [Ethiopia's other conflict](#), 4 July 2022

³⁵ Further analysis of the Amhara conflict is available from the Congressional Research Service, [Ethiopia: in brief](#), 23 January 2024; The Guardian, [Ethiopia declares a state of emergency in Amhara amid increasing violence](#), 4 August 2023

international lawyers, Adem Kassei Abebe and Zelalem Moges in Foreign Policy magazine. They warn a “full-blown civil war cannot be excluded.”³⁶

The Crisis Group think tank says the “tangle of crises is corroding inter-ethnic relations and posing threats to the country’s stability.”³⁷ The UK Government has called for civilians in the regions to be protected.³⁸

Commons Library briefings

- [Conflict in Ethiopia](#) a brief summary of the two-year conflict in Tigray region.

1.4

Somalia

Political leadership

Former President Hassam Sheikh Mohamud (2012 to 2017) was re-elected in May 2022 in a vote held by members of Parliament. He replaced incumbent President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed (known as Farmajo). The United Nations welcomed the conclusion of the presidential election and praised the peaceful transfer of power.³⁹

The government have announced that direct elections will be introduced from 2024, firstly with local council elections followed by regional elections, with the next presidential election not due until 2027.⁴⁰ President Mohamud’s pledge to amend the constitution is facing domestic opposition.⁴¹ The semi-autonomous state of Puntland said it would withdraw from the country’s federal system until constitutional amendments adopted in March 2024 are approved in a nationwide referendum.⁴²

During a visit to London in November 2023, President Mohamud called for international support to help build up state institutions, provide basic services and reconstruct its infrastructure.⁴³ In December Somalia secured \$4.5 billion of debt relief under the IMF’s heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative, meaning debt as a proportion of GDP would fall from 64% in 2018 to less than 6% of GDP by the end of the year.⁴⁴ President Mohamud lauded

³⁶ Foreign Policy, [Ethiopia’s Amhara conflict could spark civil war](#), 6 March 2024

³⁷ Crisis Group, [Ethiopia’s new war in Amhara](#), 16 November 2023

³⁸ FCDO, [UN Human Rights Council 55: UK Statement for Item 2 General Debate](#), 4 March 2024

³⁹ United Nations, [Somalia: UN welcomes end of fairly contested presidential election, calls for unity](#), 16 May 2022

⁴⁰ [Somalia says it will revert to direct vote for officials starting next year](#), Reuters, 28 May 2023

⁴¹ [Somalia constitution review generates heated debate among leaders](#), The East African, 21 March 2024; [Somalia’s old rivals reunite in debate on constitution](#), The East African, 26 March 2024; [Somalia’s Parliament approves historic constitutional amendments](#), Voice of America, 30 March 2024

⁴² The Guardian, [Somalia accused of ‘threatening national unity’ with new constitution](#), 5 April 2024

⁴³ [Somalia has year to eliminate al Shabaab militants](#), Reuters, 21 November 2023

⁴⁴ IMF, [IMF and World Bank announce US\\$4.5 billion in debt relief for Somalia](#), 13 December 2023

the move in an opinion article for the Guardian newspaper in which he outlined Somalia's economic ambitions to utilise its strategic location, young population and vast natural resources to grow its economy.⁴⁵

In December 2023 the UN Security Council lifted the arms embargo on Somalia that was first imposed in 1992, but reimposed one on al-Shabaab militants (see below).⁴⁶ The UK is the [penholder at the UN for Somalia](#). This means the UK takes the lead among the members of the Security Council for issues relating to Somalia and by extension Somaliland.

Combating al-Shabaab

In November 2023 President Mohamud said his country had a year to expel the Islamist militant group al-Shabaab. The group, linked to al-Qaeda, has been in conflict with the Somali government since 2006. It has also carried out attacks in neighbouring countries, notably the attack on the Westgate shopping centre in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2013.⁴⁷ The end of 2024 is significant because this is when the African Union peacekeeping force in Somalia, ATMIS, will be dissolved (see box).

The UK government has said tackling al-Shabaab remains one of its “top international counter-terrorism priorities” and has trained Somalian armed forces in recent years.⁴⁸ In March 2024 the US State Department designated transnational financial networks supporting the group, saying the threat it poses is not limited to Somalia because its funds are disbursed to al-Qaeda groups worldwide.⁴⁹

While power between the federal government and the jihadists has ebbed and flowed over the years, in early 2023 Crisis Group described al-Shabaab as “on the back foot,” having been dislodged from swathes of central Somalia by the national army working with clan militias.⁵⁰ Somalia's military is currently focussed on Al-Shabaab's stronghold in southern Somalia.

However, the current tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia may hinder Mohamud's 2024 deadline. Moustafa Ahma, a researcher specialising in the Horn of Africa, suggests it could act as a recruiting tool: “al-Shabaab

⁴⁵ President Mohamud, [Somalia has reached its debt relief milestone. Now the real work begins](#), The Guardian, 13 December 2023

⁴⁶ [UN Security Council lifts arms embargo on Somalia government](#), Reuters, 1 December 2023; [UN Security Council Resolution 2714](#) [PDF] and [UN Security Council Resolution 2713](#) [PDF]

⁴⁷ [Westgate shopping mall attack: What happened 10 years ago in Kenya?](#) (video report on Youtube), BBC News Africa, 2023. See also [Al-Shabaab in East Africa](#) (a timeline 2004-2022), Council on Foreign Relations, 2022

⁴⁸ HL2559 [\[Ethiopia: Somalia\]](#), 4 March 2024; PQ16649 [\[Somalia: Armed Forces\]](#), 12 March 2024

⁴⁹ US State Department, [Designating transnational network supporting al-Shabaab](#), 11 March 2024

⁵⁰ Crisis Group, [Sustaining gains in Somalia's offensive against Al-Shabaab](#), 21 March 2023

propaganda capitalises on the turbulent political history between Somalis and the Ethiopian state to mobilise and recruit fighters.”⁵¹

1 The African Union Transition Mission in Somalia

ATMIS, the [African Union Transition Mission in Somalia](#), is in the process of drawing down its forces from Somalia by the end of 2024. ATMIS was set in up April 2022 by the African Union, mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 2628 (2022), to replace the [African Union Mission in Somalia](#) (AMISOM), which had provided a peacekeeping force since 2007. Under the Somali Transition Plan, ATMIS will handover security responsibilities from the AU to the Somalia Security forces by the end of 2024. Over 5,000 troops were withdrawn in 2023 and 4,000 more are scheduled to leave by the end of June 2024.⁵²

Somaliland

A former British Protectorate, British Somaliland briefly declared independence in 1960 before uniting with Somalia. The outbreak of civil war and the collapse of President Siad Barre’s regime prompted Somaliland to declare independence in May 1991. Somaliland is self-governing, with an independent government and regular democratic elections. The capital is Hargeisa.

Somaliland is not recognised as an independent state by Somalia or any other country. It has been lauded for its political stability and democratic handovers of power, including by the UK. However, Crisis Group says Somaliland’s “[hard-earned stability is at risk](#)” following the postponement of the presidential election scheduled for November 2022.⁵³ Somaliland’s Parliament has extended President Muse Bihi Abdi’s term of office by two years, a move opposed by the main opposition parties. Commons Library briefing [Political developments in Somaliland](#) discusses the implications of the postponement of the 2022 presidential election.

⁵¹ Moustafa Ahmad, [Ethiopia eying the Red Sea may exacerbate regional extremism](#), LSE blogs, 11 December 2023

⁵² [ATMIS website](#), accessed 18 March 2024

⁵³ Crisis Group, [Overcoming Somaliland’s worsening political crisis](#), 10 November 2022

1.5

Sudan

Sudan remains in a state of conflict after fighting broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces and a paramilitary group known as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in April 2023.⁵⁴

The fighting has been described as “primarily a power struggle” between the leaders of the two powerful forces, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan for the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and General Mohamed Hamden Dagalo (also known as Hemedti) as the head of the RSF.⁵⁵

Both men participated in the coup that deposed long-time President Omar al-Bashir in 2019 and led the subsequent transitional military council. Despite then handing over to a civilian-led transitional government, Crisis Group says “both worked to consolidate their grip on authority and key sectors of Sudan’s economy.”⁵⁶ In October 2021 they deposed the civilian-led government and took power directly in a coup. During this time, tensions between the two men over Sudan’s future emerged. The armed forces and the RSF had operated alongside each other, but as separate forces, under former President Bashir.

The US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, says members of both sides have committed war crimes in Sudan, and says members of the RSF and its allies have committed crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing.⁵⁷ Blinken voiced particular concern about targeted violence with “haunting echoes of the genocide” in Darfur. UNAMID, the African Union and UN hybrid mission, ended its mission in Darfur, Sudan, in December 2020.

IGAD, the regional grouping, has appointed the Presidents of South Sudan, Kenya and Djibouti to lead their mediation efforts in Sudan. Regional leaders called for an unconditional ceasefire in Sudan and for IGAD to facilitate talks between the RSF and SAF at an extraordinary summit in December 2023.⁵⁸

The UK is the [penholder at the UN Security Council](#) for Sudan, though not Sudan sanctions or relations with South Sudan (which is held by the US). The UK drafted [resolution 2724](#), adopted on 8 March 2024, calls for an immediate cessation of hostilities during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, to allow unhindered humanitarian access, and for “all warring parties to seek a sustainable resolution to the conflict through dialogue.”⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Detailed analysis of the conflict, including territorial control, centre of attacks and shifting alliances between groups is available from ACLED, [One year of war in Sudan](#), 14 April 2024

⁵⁵ Council on Foreign Relations, [Civil war in Sudan](#), 19 November 2023

⁵⁶ Crisis Group, [A race against time to halt Sudan’s collapse](#), 22 June 2023

⁵⁷ US State Department, [War Crimes, Crimes Against Humanity, and Ethnic Cleansing Determination in Sudan](#), 6 December 2023

⁵⁸ IGAD, [Communiqué of the 41st extraordinary IGAD assembly of Heads of State and Government](#), 9 December 2023

⁵⁹ [UN Security Council resolution 2724](#), 8 March 2024

The UK issued a joint statement, urgently calling for the Sudanese Armed Forces' to allow humanitarian access to Sudan, on behalf of 44 countries at the UN Human Rights Council on 20 March.⁶⁰

The UK has announced a near doubling of aid to Sudan, from nearly £50 million in financial year 2023 to 2024, to £89 million in 2024 to 2025.⁶¹ On the anniversary of the start of the conflict, the UK imposed sanctions on three business supporting the RSF and SAF, bringing the total number of entities sanctioned since the start of the conflict to nine.⁶²

Commons Library briefings

- [Sudan: The “forgotten” conflict](#), February 2024
- [UK response to unrest in Sudan](#), April 2023

2 Special envoys for the region

- UK Special Envoy for the Red Sea and Horn of Africa: Sarah Montgomery
- UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa: Hannah Tettah
- US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa: Mike Hammer
- Chinese Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Affairs: Xue Bing
- EU Special Representative for the Horn of Africa: Annette Weber

⁶⁰ FCDO, [UN Human Rights Council 55: Joint Statement on Sudan Humanitarian Access](#), 20 March 2024, updated 25 March 2024

⁶¹ FCDO, [UK to nearly double aid for Sudan as humanitarian crisis deepens](#), 28 March 2024

⁶² FDCO, [UK sanctions businesses funding Sudan war](#), 15 April 2024

2

Regional relations and tensions

2.1

Security of the Red Sea: Houthi attacks

The attacks on shipping transiting the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait from by Houthis in Yemen in late 2023 and early 2024 has prompted a reassessment of the security of the Red Sea from a maritime security perspective.

About 15% of global maritime trade volume normally passes through the Suez Canal, although the IMF says that has dropped by 50% as a result of Houthi action.⁶³

While much of the focus of events in the Horn and Arabian peninsula tends to be on land, the Red Sea's maritime domain "may be emerging as a vector of instability," according to Simon Rynn and Benjamin P. Nickels at the George C Marshall European Centre for Security Studies.⁶⁴ They argue the area's complexity and strategic importance merits greater focus on ensuring security at sea.

In 2020 Saudi Arabia set up the Red Sea Council (formally known as the Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden) with Egypt, Jordan, Eritrea, Yemen, Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia. The Saudi Foreign Minister said at the launch that the Kingdom is keen to "coordinate and cooperate" with Council members to work to protect the security of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.⁶⁵

In December 2023, the US announced an international maritime coalition to support freedom of navigation. Over 20 countries, including the UK, are participating, but only one from the Middle East (Bahrain). The UK has also deployed three ships to the region. In February, the European Union also launched a separate mission.

⁶³ [Red Sea attacks disrupt global trade](#), IMF blog, 7 March 2024

⁶⁴ Simon Rynn and Benjamin P. Nickels, [Enhancing security in the Red Sea arena](#), George C Marshall European Centre for Security Studies, March 2024. The paper is based on a conference organised by RUSI and the George Marshall European Centre which the author attended.

⁶⁵ Arab News, [Saudi Arabia and 7 countries form council to secure Red Sea and Gulf of Aden](#), 6 January 2020

Commons Library briefing [UK and international response to Houthis in the Red Sea 2024](#) provides further information on the UK and international maritime response.

2.2 Fluctuating relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea

Eritrea and Ethiopia's history and peoples are complex, intertwined and deep rooted. Eritrea declared independence from Ethiopia in 1993. Relations remained fraught and the two fought a border war between 1998 and 2000, and remained in a "state of war" until 2018, when relations dramatically and unexpectedly improved with a peace agreement forged by Ethiopia's new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. This paved the way for a restoration of diplomatic ties and cross-border travel, and a Nobel Peace Prize for Abiy. The peace agreement also contributed to the UN Security Council lifting an arms embargo and some sanctions on Eritrea.⁶⁶

Abiy enlisted forces from Eritrea as part of the federal military effort against the Tigray People's Liberation Front in Tigray in northern Ethiopia, which borders Eritrea. Eritrean forces were accused of committing atrocities and human rights violations during the two-year conflict, that came to an end in November 2022.⁶⁷

The relationship shifted again in late 2023 when Abiy declared ambitions for land-locked Ethiopia to gain access to the sea. At the time, many commentators suggested he harboured ambitions for the Eritrean Red Sea port of Assab (which was part of Ethiopia pre-Eritrean independence).⁶⁸ Abiy's subsequent agreement with Somaliland, while reducing concerns about a possible escalation with Eritrea, has instead inflamed tensions with Somalia (see below).

2.3 Ethiopia and Somalia

Ethiopia's relations with Somalia have soured after Ethiopia agreed a deal with the self-declared Republic of Somaliland, whose declaration of

⁶⁶ [UN Security Council removes Eritrea sanctions after years](#), Reuters, 15 November 2018

⁶⁷ See Commons Library debate pack [Conflict in Ethiopia](#), 11 November 2022

⁶⁸ [Ethiopia PM Abiy Ahmed eyes Red Sea port, inflaming tensions](#), BBC News, 8 November 2023; [Abiy Ahmed's imperial ambitions are bad news for Africa, and the world](#), Al Jazeera, 14 November 2023; [Are Ethiopia and Eritrea on the path to war?](#), Foreign Policy, 7 November 2023; Michael Woldemariam, [Taking Ethiopia-Eritrea tensions seriously](#), US Institute for Peace, 15 December 2023

independence from Somalia in 1991 has not been recognised by Somalia or any other country.

The agreement, announced on 1 January 2024, is reported to allow Ethiopia access to the sea for commercial traffic through a port on Somaliland's coast and to lease a section of the coast to Ethiopia's navy. In return, Somaliland will get a share in Ethiopia Airlines. The text of the Memorandum of Understanding has not been published and the two sides differ as to whether it includes agreement by Ethiopia to recognise Somaliland as an independent country at some point in the future.⁶⁹

Somalia described the deal as an act of "aggression" and recalled its ambassador from Addis Ababa. Somali President Mohamud said "If [Ethiopians] come into the country, Somalia will do everything that it can to defend itself."⁷⁰ Ethiopia's Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, has said he has "no intention" of going to war with Somalia.⁷¹

The two countries have fought before, in the late 1970s, for control of what is now called the Somali region of Ethiopia (known as the Ogaden conflict).⁷² However, in recent years Ethiopia has contributed forces to the military effort to counter Al Shabaab.

Regional response

The repercussions of the agreement are not yet clear, partly because of the lack of clarity over its contents.

Somalia's President has sought regional support in opposing the deal, raising the issue during visits to Eritrea and Egypt in early January 2024. Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said "Egypt will not allow anyone to threaten Somalia or affect its security" at a press conference alongside President Mohamud.⁷³

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) expressed deep concern about recent developments between Ethiopia and Somalia at an extraordinary summit in Uganda on 18 January. IGAD reaffirmed respect for the sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity of Somalia, and said any agreement or arrangement should be with the consent of Somalia. IGAD also called on the two countries to engage in constructive dialogue.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ [Ethiopia-Somaliland deal makes waves in Horn of Africa](#), BBC News, 19 January 2024

⁷⁰ [Somalia will defend itself if Ethiopia seals 'illegal' port deal, president says](#), Reuters, 24 February 2024

⁷¹ [Ethiopia's leader plays down fears of conflict with Somalia over a planned naval port](#), AP News, 6 February 2024

⁷² [Ethiopia-Somaliland deal makes waves in Horn of Africa](#), BBC News, 19 January 2024

⁷³ Reuters, [President Sisi says Egypt will not allow any threat to Somalia or its security](#), 21 January 2024

⁷⁴ [Communiqué of the 42nd Extraordinary Assembly of IGAD Heads of State and Government](#), IGAD, 18 January 2024

The AU Peace and Security Council issued a press statement expressing deep concern over the ongoing tension between the two countries and stressed the imperative to “respect the unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty” of all AU Member States, including both Ethiopia and Somalia.⁷⁵ Mauritania, in its capacity as Chair of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), wrote to the UN Security Council expressing its “rejection of any act violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Somalia.”⁷⁶

The UN Security Council met in private, at Somalia’s request, to consider the situation between Ethiopia and Somalia on 29 January 2024.

2.4 Blue Nile dam: Ethiopia and Sudan tensions

The filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which Ethiopia began constructing on the River Nile in 2011 to significantly increase its electricity output, continues to cause tensions with downstream countries Sudan and Egypt.⁷⁷ The politics of the dam are “fraught and wide ranging”, says Amit Ranjan, at the National University of Singapore.⁷⁸

Efforts to reach agreement on flow rates, particularly during times of drought, have been inconsistent. Talks were revived in August 2023, having been suspended in 2021.⁷⁹ In September 2023 Ethiopia announced it had completed the fourth and final filling of the dam, a move Egypt condemned as “illegal”.⁸⁰ The latest round of talks ended in December 2023 without agreement.⁸¹

2.5 Somali coast: a return of pirates?

Between 2008 and 2014, piracy off the coast of Somalia cost the global economy billions of dollars and prompted a significant international maritime presence. The Royal Navy’s role, and UK policy, was examined in 2012 by the Foreign Affairs Committee in [Piracy off the coast of Somalia](#)

⁷⁵ African Union, [Press Statement of the 1192nd Meeting of the Peace and Security Council held on 17 January 2024 to consider the Situation between the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Federal Republic of Somalia](#), 18 January 2024

⁷⁶ [Letter dated 9 January 2024 from the Permanent Representative of Mauritania to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council](#), UN Digital Library, 9 January 2024

⁷⁷ [Why is Egypt worried about Ethiopia’s dam on the Nile?](#), BBC News, 13 September 2023

⁷⁸ Amit Ranjan, [The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and its discontents](#), LSE Blog, 28 February 2024

⁷⁹ [Filling of Grand Dam on the Nile complete, Ethiopia says](#), Al Jazeera, 10 September 2023

⁸⁰ [Filling of Grand Dam on the Nile complete, Ethiopia says](#), Al Jazeera, 10 September 2023

⁸¹ [Ethiopia and Egypt say no agreement in latest talks over a contentious dam on the Nile](#), AP, 20 December 2023

[PDF], and in Commons Library briefing [Piracy at sea: overview and policy responses](#).⁸²

Since November 2023 there have been a number of attempted hijackings off the coast of Somalia. On 14 December 2023, the International Maritime Bureau recorded the first successful hijacking of a vessel off the coast of Somalia since 2017.⁸³

Somali pirates have told Reuters they resumed operations because international naval forces were distracted by the Houthi strikes. Reuters reports regional officials and industry sources are concerned the problem could escalate, increasing further the costs of transporting goods through the waterways.⁸⁴ The International Maritime Bureau provides a [live piracy map](#).

The FCDO says it is monitoring the situation in the region closely, and works “closely with allies and regional partners through the Djibouti code of conduct and bi-laterally to build capacity, strength and resilience to ensure maritime security and freedoms for all.”⁸⁵

⁸² Foreign Affairs Committee, [Piracy off the coast of Somalia](#), 5 January 2012, HC 1318 2010-12

⁸³ ICC International Maritime Bureau, [Annual piracy and armed robbery report 2023](#), 11 January 2024

⁸⁴ [Somali pirates return, adding to global shipping crisis](#), Reuters, 21 March 2024

⁸⁵ HL2596 [\[Horn of Africa: Piracy\]](#), 5 March 2024

3 Humanitarian issues

3.1 Food insecurity

Food insecurity is affecting millions of people across the Horn of Africa. Over 50 million people in the wider region are food insecure, experiencing crisis levels of acute food insecurity, by the World Health Organisation.⁸⁶ One of the of the longest and most severe droughts on record has been followed by heavy rains which have caused extensive flooding, Both the weather and conflict have severely affected the farming, harvesting and trade in food.

UK Government officials have voiced “extreme concern” at the risk of famine in Sudan and, referencing a UN report about obstruction of humanitarian aid, directly said that “using starvation as a method of warfare is prohibited by international law.”⁸⁷ In mid-April 2024, senior UN officials warned “famine is now a real and dangerous possibility in the months ahead” in Sudan.⁸⁸ International donors pledged \$2.2 billion in aid to Sudan at a conference hosted in Paris on 15 April 2024; the UK reaffirmed its pledge of £89 million in aid for financial year 2024 to 2025.⁸⁹

The UK Government says building climate resilience is “central” to its work in the Horn of Africa and it is scaling up the provision of climate finances to the area to promote this.⁹⁰ The UK allocated £11 million in humanitarian funding toward dedicated El Niño prevention and response projects following flooding in Kenya and Somalia in late 2023.⁹¹

MPs held a debate on [hunger in the East and Horn of Africa](#) in April 2023, and the International Development Committee heard from [experts on the humanitarian crisis in Sudan](#) in May 2023 and on [hunger in the Horn of Africa](#) in November 2022. The House of Lords held a [debate on famine in the Horn](#)

⁸⁶ WHO, [Situation report: Greater Horn of Africa Food Insecurity and Health Grade 3 Emergency 1 November to 31 December 2023](#), 20 February 2024

⁸⁷ FCDO, [The risk of famine in Sudan is of extreme concern: UK statement at the UN Security Council](#), 20 March 2024

⁸⁸ [The crisis in Sudan necessitates urgent action](#), Al Jazeera, 14 April 2024

⁸⁹ French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, [International humanitarian conference for Sudan and neighbouring countries](#), 15 April 2024. The UK committed is listed in Euros and US dollars, [The FCDO confirmed the £89 pledge in a press release issued on the same day: UK sanctions businesses funding Sudan war](#), 15 April 2024

⁹⁰ HL3084 [[Horn of Africa: Climate change](#)], 20 March 2024

⁹¹ PQ2394 [[Horn of Africa: Floods](#)], 22 November 2023

[of Africa](#) in February 2023. Commons Library briefing [Hunger in the East and Horn of Africa](#) assessed the situation in April 2023.

3.2 Internally displaced persons

Conflict and environmental shocks in parts of the region have prompted the displacement of millions of people in and around the Horn in recent years. This includes refugees and migrants from other countries who were hosted or settled in these areas.

Conflict since April 2023 in Sudan has made it the “largest internal displacement crisis in the world”, according to the International Organisation for Migration.⁹² More than 8.6 million people, or about 16% of the population, have left their homes.⁹³ Of these, about 6.6 million are internally displaced, and a further 1.8 million have fled abroad, many into neighbouring South Sudan, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia and the Central African Republic.⁹⁴

3 Migratory routes from the Horn

There are two major migration routes from the Horn of Africa, according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM):

- The Eastern route from the Horn of Africa to Yemen and Gulf States
- The Southern route from the Horn of Africa through Kenya and Tanzania to Southern Africa

The IOM describes these as among “the most dangerous, complex, and under-reported migratory routes in the world.”⁹⁵ Nearly half a million movements were recorded in 2023, predominantly across the Eastern route. The IOM says most people travel for economic reasons, but environmental shocks and conflict are also a driver of movement. The IOM says people often rely on smugglers to facilitate their movement across the Eastern route.⁹⁶

⁹² IOM, [Sudan faces world’s largest internal displacement crisis](#), 16 October 2023

⁹³ UN OCHA, [Sudan: One year of conflict – key facts and figures](#), 15 April 2024

⁹⁴ UN OCHA, [Sudan: One year of conflict – key facts and figures](#), 15 April 2024; Mixed Migration Centre/IOM, [Experiences of refugees and migrants fleeing Sudan to Addis Ababa as a result of the 2023 conflict](#) [PDF], December 2023

⁹⁵ IOM, [Appeal for USD 112 million for migrants along the Eastern and Southern Africa routes](#), 23 February 2024

⁹⁶ IOM, [Where is the Eastern Route?](#), accessed 29 February 2024

3.3 Conflict related sexual violence

There have been many reports of conflict related sexual violence in northern Ethiopia (2020-2022) and Sudan (April 2023 onwards).

In December 2021, UN Human rights experts said sexual violence in Tigray “appeared to have been used as a “deliberate strategy to terrorise, degrade and humiliate the victims and the ethnic minority group that they belong to [... which] have devastating physical and psychological impacts on the victims.”⁹⁷

A UN report says scores of people, including children, have been subject to sexual violence in Sudan. The report says many of the reported rapes were committed by the RSF.⁹⁸

An explanation of the UK’s Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI) can be found in Commons Library briefing [Conflict-related sexual violence and the UK’s approach](#).

3.4 Cholera outbreak and other diseases

The WHO says the region is battling multiple disease outbreaks including cholera, measles, malaria, and dengue fever. Wetter than usual conditions between October and December 2023 as a result of El Niño has seen an increase in cases in areas affected by flooding.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ UN Human Rights Office of the High Commission, [Tigray conflict: UN experts call for urgent action to stop violence against women](#), 3 December 2021

⁹⁸ UN Human Rights Office of the High Commission, [Sudan: New UN report details horrific violations and abuses by both sides as fighting spreads](#), 23 February 2024

⁹⁹ WHO, [Situation report: Greater Horn of Africa Food Insecurity and Health Grade 3 Emergency 1 November to 31 December 2023](#), 20 February 2024

4 UK aid to the Horn of Africa

Following the Government's 2021 integrated review of UK development, defence, and foreign policy, then Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said there would be a "major shift" in UK aid to East Africa to address "human suffering" and reflective of the "UK's unique role and clear national strategic interest".¹⁰⁰

The Department defined the region as including Horn of Africa states Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan, alongside others.¹⁰¹

Three of these states—Ethiopia, Somalia, and South Sudan—were among the top-ten recipients of UK bilateral aid in 2020, 2021, and 2022, while Sudan was a top-ten recipient in 2020.¹⁰² However, like many UK aid recipients, the value of UK aid to these countries has fallen since 2021 when UK aid spending fell from 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) to 0.5%.¹⁰³

For example, FCDO bilateral aid to Ethiopia fell from £128 million in 2021/22 to £85 million in 2022/23. It is due to rise to £89 million in 2023/24 and £214 million in 2024/25. Djibouti and Eritrea are not planned to receive FCDO country-specific aid in the years 2022/23 to 2024/25, on current plans.¹⁰⁴

In 2022, the most recent year for which final spending data is available, the UK provided £296.6 million of bilateral aid across these six states, down from £412.8 million in 2021. In 2022, £140.3 million (47%) was for humanitarian purposes, £42 million for health, £36 million to improve governance, and £22 million for education.¹⁰⁵ In 2023, the UK Government pledged further in response to drought, climate change and conflict in the region.¹⁰⁶

The FCDO's development partnership summaries for [Ethiopia](#), [Somalia](#) and [South Sudan](#) provide more information on UK aid programmes and priorities.

¹⁰⁰ HCWS935 [[FCDO update](#)], 21 April 2021

¹⁰¹ PQ 185988 [[Development aid](#)], 27 April 2021

¹⁰² FCDO, [Statistics on international development: Final UK aid spend 2020 to 2022](#), summaries

¹⁰³ See Commons Library, [UK aid: Spending reductions since 2020 and outlook from 2023](#), section 7.2

¹⁰⁴ FCDO, [Annual report and accounts 2022/23](#), July 2023, p267 and FCDO, [Annual report and accounts 2021/22](#), July 2022, p251

¹⁰⁵ FCDO, [Statistics on international development: Final UK aid spend 2022](#), September 2023, Data underlying the statistics

¹⁰⁶ FCDO, [UK pledges support for over a million people in East Africa](#), 24 May 2023, HC Deb, [25 April 2023](#), c301WH

4

The Gulf States and the Horn of Africa

The involvement of the Arab Gulf States in the Horn of Africa, in particular Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has grown noticeably in recent years.¹⁰⁷

Their interest has been prompted in part by investment opportunities (in agriculture, natural resources and consumer markets) and the growing importance of the Red Sea as a geostrategic space.

With a coastline on the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia has an obvious geographic interest in developments both in and across the sea. Saudi's second city, Jeddah, sits on the Red Sea across from Port Sudan. The Kingdom is also spending US\$500 billion in constructing a huge, futuristic urban development called [NEOM](#) in the northwest of the country at the top of the Red Sea. Khalil Al-Anani, senior fellow at the Arab Centre Washington DC, says Saudi's focus on Red Sea security is "integral" to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030, which "aims to diversify the Saudi economy and position it as a global hub for trade, innovation, and tourism."¹⁰⁸

4.1

Growth in investment

Historically there have long been links between the Horn of Africa across the Red Sea and the wider Middle East. African diasporas working in the Gulf countries send remittances home and forge cultural links.

But in recent years there has been a clear shift, with Gulf states taking a more proactive approach to their 'near abroad'. Gulf States invested \$13 billion in the Horn of Africa between 2000 and 2017, according to a study by the Clingendael Institute, a think-tank in the Netherlands.¹⁰⁹ Saudi Arabia and the UAE lead the way, focusing investments in Ethiopia and Sudan across the agriculture, manufacturing and construction sectors.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group, [Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact](#), 19 September 2019; Jessica Larsen and Finn Stepputat, [Gulf state rivalries in the Horn of Africa: Time for a Red Sea Policy](#), Danish Institute for International Studies, 1 May 2019

¹⁰⁸ Khalil Al-Anani, [The Sudan Crisis: How regional actor's competing interests fuel the conflict](#), 11 May 2023

¹⁰⁹ Jos Meester, Willem van den Berg & Harry Verhoeven, [Riyal Politik: The political economy of Gulf investments in the Horn of Africa](#), Clingendael Institute, April 2018

Jason Mosley, a specialist in the region, in a [UK Government funded report](#) for the Rift Valley Institute in 2021, suggests the Gulf States and Turkey have “quickly become some of the most important external players in the competitive political marketplace of the Horn.”¹¹⁰

Maritime infrastructure

A Birmingham University hosted project examining relations between the Gulf and the Horn through the lens of port infrastructures and transport corridors explains that Gulf states have heavily invested in infrastructures by “leasing ports in Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia, and Somaliland, modernizing ports and airports, building deep-water port facilities, and establishing military bases.”¹¹¹

The UAE in particular has focused on maritime infrastructure in the Red Sea along the East African coast. Giorgio Cafiero, of Gulf State Analytics, says the UAE has steadily expanded its control over ports and logistics hubs in East Africa over the last two decades.¹¹² DP World, the Dubai-based logistics company owned by the Emirate of Dubai, is developing Berbera Port in Somaliland, which the UK is also financially supporting.¹¹³ May Darwich, associate professor in International Relations of the Middle East at the University of Birmingham, writing in September 2022, suggested gaining access to Ethiopia would help Berbera port develop its “promise”.¹¹⁴ At the beginning of 2024, Ethiopia reached an agreement with Somaliland for access to its coast. This agreement is discussed in more detail in section 2.3.

4.2

Intra-Arabian competition

Gulf states involvement in the Horn also reflects their own broader strategic agendas and competing agendas.

Camille Lons, writing for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, explains Gulf States (and Turkey) “have intensely competed to counter each other’s influence, projecting their rivalries on to the politics of the Horn.”¹¹⁵ The authors of the Clingendael Institute suggest “Gulf states’ largesse is

¹¹⁰ Jason Mosley, [Turkey and the Gulf States in the Horn of Africa: fluctuating dynamics of engagement, investment and influence](#), Rift Valley Institute, 2021

¹¹¹ [Port Infrastructures, international politics and everyday life project](#), hosted by the Birmingham University funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York, accessed 1 March 2023

¹¹² Giorgio Cafiero, [The UAE and the Red Sea security crisis](#), Arab Centre Washington DC, 27 February 2024

¹¹³ PQ9982 [[Somaliland: Politics and Government](#)], 22 January 2024; PQ192710 [[British International Investment: DP World](#)], 10 July 2023

¹¹⁴ May Darwich, [Waiting for Ethiopia: Hopes and aspirations of port infrastructure development in Somaliland](#), 19 September 2022

¹¹⁵ Camille Lons, [Gulf countries reconsider their involvement in the Horn of Africa](#), 1 June 2021

frequently driven by political considerations to limit Iranian influence as well as intra-Arabian competition.”

Recent analysis of Gulf States involvement in the Horn of Africa reflects the relatively recent rift between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.¹¹⁶ This rift is now “reshaping” the Red Sea arena, according to Simon Rynn and Benjamin P. Nickels, writing for the George C Marshall European Centre for Security Studies.¹¹⁷ Cameron Hudson, of Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies describes a “sort of cat-and-mouse game between the Emiratis and the Saudis in the region right now”.¹¹⁸

Both Saudi and UAE are united against Iranian influence in the Red Sea region, most clearly in Yemen, where Iran is supporting the Houthis.¹¹⁹ Sudan and Djibouti restored ties with Iran in September and October 2023. In a statement, Djibouti and Iran said they had agreed to strengthen co-operation on a “wide range of areas including investment, trade, science, and technological innovation.”¹²⁰ Sudan’s acting foreign minister visited Tehran in early February 2024. Vicktor Marsai and Erzsébet N. Rózsa, analysing Iran’s interests in the Horn, suggest that the region is important to Tehran not just because of its individual value, but because of “the matrix of interest and competition in which the Islamic Republic can weaken its rivals’ positions.”¹²¹ Commons Library briefing [Iran’s influence in the Middle East](#) discusses relations with the Gulf States.

Supporting armed groups in Sudan

External support for some of the armed actors in Sudan raises fears of proxy wars. Alex De Waal, the Executive Director of the World Peace Foundation, says “Sudan has become a cockpit in which the rising powers of the Middle East seek to project their power and gain an advantage over their rivals.”¹²²

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have long played a significant role in Sudan, says Khalil Al-Anani of the Arab Centre Washington DC. He says the support difference sides in the current conflict: “Saudi Arabia has strong and long-standing ties with al-Burhan (head of the Sudanese Armed Forces), whereas

¹¹⁶ Charles W. Dunne, [The UAE-Saudi Arabia rivalry becomes a rift](#), Arab Centre Washington DC, 6 July 2023

¹¹⁷ Simon Rynn and Benjamin P. Nickels, [Enhancing security in the Red Sea arena](#), George C Marshall European Centre for Security Studies, March 2024. The paper is based on a conference organised by RUSI and the George Marshall European Centre which the author attended.

¹¹⁸ [Saudi Arabia and UAE compete for influence in Africa, analysts say](#), AFP, 21 February 2024

¹¹⁹ Commons Library briefing, [UK and international response to Houthis in the Red Sea 2024](#), 1 March 2024

¹²⁰ [Djibouti and Iran restore diplomatic ties](#), BBC News, 22 September 2023

¹²¹ Vicktor Marsai and Erzsébet N. Rózsa, [The late-comer friend: Iranian interests on the Horn of Africa](#), Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 17:4, published online 16 January 2024

¹²² Alex de Waal, [Sudan is collapsing – here’s how to stop it](#), The World Today, 2 February 2024

the UAE has invested heavily in Hemedti (head of the Rapid Support Forces, RSF) over the past few years.¹²³

There are reports the UAE is supporting, and arming, the RSF. A leaked report by experts for the UN Security Council, seen by the Financial Times, found “credible” evidence that the UAE is arming the RSF.¹²⁴ The UAE has denied these claims.¹²⁵ The Middle East Eye, a digital news organisation, says a network of munition supply lines for the RSF can be traced to the United Arab Emirates via Libya, Chad and Uganda.¹²⁶

Saudi has hosted talks between groups in Sudan, in Jeddah, but these collapsed at the end of the 2023.¹²⁷ The newly appointed US Presidential Special Envoy for Sudan, Tom Perriello, notably visited Saudi Arabia and UAE as part of a two-week trip to the region shortly after being appointed in February 2024.¹²⁸ On 15 April Perriello suggested Saudi will restart Jeddah talks “within the next three weeks”.¹²⁹

The Commons Library has a series of introductory country profiles on the Gulf States which includes [Saudi Arabia](#) and the [United Arab Emirates](#).

¹²³ Khalil Al-Anani, [The Sudan Crisis: How regional actor’s competing interests fuel the conflict](#), 11 May 2023

¹²⁴ UAE denies sending weapons to paramilitary group in Sudan war, Financial Times, 24 January 2024

¹²⁵ [UAE denies sending weapons to Sudan’s RSF paramilitary: Report](#), Al Jazeera, 24 January 2024

¹²⁶ [How the UAE kept the Sudan war raging](#), Middle East Eye, 25 January 2024; Further analysis of the SAF’s and RSF’s regional support networks can be found in Hager Ali, [The War in Sudan: How weapons and networks shattered a power struggle](#), German Institute for Global and Area Studies, February 2024

¹²⁷ Crisis Group, [Sudan’s Calamitous Civil War: A Chance to Draw Back from the Abyss](#), 9 January 2024

¹²⁸ US State Department, [Special Online Briefing with Special Envoy for Sudan Tom Perriello](#), 21 March 2024

¹²⁹ [US welcomes decision for renewal of Sudan peace talks in Saudi Arabia](#), Voice of America, 16 April 2024; Perriello had previously suggested they could resume on 18 April: US State Department, [Special Online Briefing with Special Envoy for Sudan Tom Perriello](#), 21 March 2024

5 China and the Horn of Africa

The creation of a special envoy for the Horn of Africa in February 2022 reflects China's growing interest and involvement in the Horn of Africa.

China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017 and has invested heavily in infrastructure projects both there and in Ethiopia. A senior Chinese official has described the Horn of Africa as having "geographically strategic importance, abundant resources and enormous potential."¹³⁰ China hosted a peace conference in Addis Ababa in 2022, and the special envoy has signalled China's desire to "play a role in [the] area of security."

China's Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013, encompasses most of Africa, including the five countries examined in this briefing. Eritrea was the last of the five to sign a BRI memorandum of understanding with China, in November 2021.

5.1 Special envoy signals new engagement

China appointed Xue Bing to the new post of special envoy for the Horn of Africa in February 2022. At the time, the Foreign Ministry explained the envoys role was to promote China's "peaceful development" plan for the region and to help countries "achieve long-term stability, development and prosperity."¹³¹

Shortly after, China launched the "Outlook on Peace and Development in the Horn of Africa", described by a senior official as aimed at helping the region to achieve "peace, prosperity and long-term stability."¹³²

One analysis suggests the Horn of Africa is "crucial for advancing [China's] strategic positing towards Africa by pushing forward Belt and Road Initiative

¹³⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, [Ambassador Ma Xinmin Publishes Article Titled New Blueprint for Peace and Development in the Horn of Africa on Brown Land](#), 6 April 2022

¹³¹ [China appoints new special envoy for turbulent Horn of Africa region](#), Reuters, 22 February 2022

¹³² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, [Ambassador Ma Xinmin Publishes Article Titled New Blueprint for Peace and Development in the Horn of Africa on Brown Land](#), 6 April 2022

projects in the region”.¹³³ The study, by Karoline Eickhoff and Nadine Godehardt for the SWP-Berlin, says “Ethiopia represents a central hub for China’s strategic presence”, but is also forming strategic diplomatic and security partnerships with other countries in the Horn.

Protecting Chinese citizens, and assets, in the region is also prompting greater interest from Beijing in security engagement, according to Lukas Fiala from the LSE.¹³⁴ The Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) was involved in anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia and supporting World Food Programme shipments during 2008 and 2014.¹³⁵ China has also financially supported AMISOM, the now-defunct African Union Mission in Somalia.¹³⁶

Xue Bing has made multiple trips to the region, including hosting a peace conference in Addis Ababa in June 2022 which he said was the “first time for China to play a role in the area of security”, adding that China wants a more important role “not only in trade and investments but also in the area of peace and development.”¹³⁷

5 Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia and the UAE join the BRICS

Ethiopia’s membership of the BRICS provides further opportunities for China to deepen relations and potentially develop common positions on international affairs.

The BRICS are the informal grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.¹³⁸ In 2023 they opted to expand, inviting Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Iran to join, which they all did in early 2024.¹³⁹

The BRICS+ provides a forum for the countries involved to discuss issues of common interest. BBC News has described the formation of the BRICS as a way to “bring together the world’s most important developing countries, to challenge the political and economic power of the wealthier nations of North America and Western Europe.”¹⁴⁰ The European Parliamentary Research Service suggest in a briefing that the recent expansion of the bloc “can be understood as a move to create a more balanced world order by giving greater prominence to the perspectives of the Global South and making them more central to global discussions”.¹⁴¹

¹³³ Karoline Eickhoff and Nadine Godehardt, [China’s Horn of Africa Initiative: Fostering or fragmenting peace?](#) [PDF], SWP (German Institute for International and Security Affairs, October 2022

¹³⁴ Lukas Fiala, [Will China bring stability to the Horn of Africa](#), 17 June 2022

¹³⁵ Foreign Affairs Committee, [Piracy off the coast of Somalia](#), 5 January 2012, HC 1318 2010-12

¹³⁶ [China donates \\$1.2 million to AU mission in Somalia](#), Africa News, 9 December 2019

¹³⁷ [Beijing seeks mediator role in turbulent Horn of Africa](#), Voice of America, 30 June 2022

¹³⁸ Brazil, Russia, India and China formed the BRIC group in 2006, adding South Africa in 2010.

¹³⁹ [Brics: What is the group and which countries have joined?](#), BBC News, 1 February 2024

¹⁴⁰ [Brics: What is the group and which countries have joined?](#), BBC News, 1 February 2024

¹⁴¹ European Parliament, [Expansion of BRICS: A quest for greater global influence?](#) [PDF], March 2024

5.2

Bilateral relations

China has also developed a tradition since 1991 for the Foreign Minister to visit the African continent at the beginning of every calendar year.¹⁴² In recent years, this has included visits to Ethiopia and to the African Union, which is headquartered in Addis Ababa (2019 and 2023), Djibouti (2020) Eritrea (2020 and 2022). There have also been high-level visits by Ethiopian and Eritrean leaders to Beijing.

China and Djibouti

China has invested heavily in Djibouti.

China spent \$14 billion on investments and loans for Djibouti between 2012 and 2020, according to France 24.¹⁴³

In 2017 it established its first overseas military base in Djibouti. At the time Beijing described it as a logistics facility, to support naval ships taking part in patrols off the coast of Yemen and Somalia.¹⁴⁴

In early 2021 the state-owned China Merchants Group agreed to carry out a £3 billion expansion of Djibouti port's infrastructure, in which it already owned shares, turning it into a business hub with exhibition spaces, hotels and shopping centres. The company said Djibouti had a "stable geopolitical environment and the largest deep-water port in East Africa".¹⁴⁵ China Merchants and UAE-owned DP World are involved in legal proceedings relating over Djibouti's Doraleh Container Terminal.¹⁴⁶

In 2023 Djibouti signed a preliminary agreement with a Chinese space firm to build a rocket launch site. The deal will allow Hong Kong Aerospace Technology Group to build a launch site for satellites and rockets in the country. When built, it would be Africa's first satellite-launch facility.¹⁴⁷ According to Benjamin Silverstein at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, it would mark the "first instance of a launch facility funded by China or a private Chinese company in foreign territory."¹⁴⁸

¹⁴² Mark Green, [For thirty years every Chinese Foreign Minister visits Africa first](#), Wilson Centre blog, 28 March 2023 (accessed 3 April 2024)

¹⁴³ ["Djibouti-China marriage 'slowly unravelling' as investment project disappoints"](#) France 24, 9 April 2012

¹⁴⁴ [China formally opens first overseas military base in Djibouti](#), Reuters, 1 August 2017

¹⁴⁵ "China Merchants signs US\$350 million deal for Shekou-style revamp of Djibouti port", South China Morning Post, 5 January 2021; [China Merchants signs deal with \\$3 billion expansion of Djibouti City port](#), Global Construction Review, 8 January 2021

¹⁴⁶ [DP World wins latest judgement in Hong Kong Court over Djibouti concession](#), Port Technology International, 20 September 2022

¹⁴⁷ [Djibouti signs a \\$1 billion deal with Hong Kong to build a spaceport in the Horn of Africa](#), Business Insider Africa, 10 January 2023

¹⁴⁸ [China's space dream is a legal nightmare](#), Foreign Policy, 21 April 2023

Silverstein suggests China may have selected Djibouti because it is not a party to the major treaties governing outer space behaviour.¹⁴⁹

Djibouti port is also the terminus for a Chinese paid for and built railway line from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, opened in 2018.

China and Ethiopia

Land-locked Ethiopia is heavily dependent on Djibouti for sea access, and the Chinese-funded and constructed railway from Addis Ababa provides an alternative to road transport to reach to the port.¹⁵⁰ It is one of the many infrastructure projects funded or built by Chinese companies. Eickhoff and Godehardt say the accumulated foreign direct investment from China to Ethiopia amounted to US\$2.27 billion between 2003 and 2020, significantly increasing in recent years.¹⁵¹ Chinese loans are estimated to amount to US\$14.1 billion between 2000 and 2020, predominantly in the fields of transport, energy and information and communications technology. This is according to the [Chinese Loans to Africa](#) (CLA) Database, managed by the Boston University Global Development Policy Center.¹⁵²

Chinese President Xi Jinping has described Ethiopia as an “important participant” in the development of China's Belt and Road Initiative. During a visit to Beijing by Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in October 2023, President Xi said they should be “partners in promoting South-South solidarity and cooperation and safeguarding international fairness and justice.”¹⁵³ Abiy signed a number of bilateral cooperation agreements with China during the visit on agriculture, culture, health, and green, urban and infrastructure development.¹⁵⁴ China is also discussing post-conflict reconstruction projects in Tigray.¹⁵⁵

China funded and paid for the headquarters of the African Union, which is located in the Ethiopian capital. There have since been reports, denied by Beijing, that China has spied on the headquarters.¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁹ [China's space dream is a legal nightmare](#), Foreign Policy, 21 April 2023

¹⁵⁰ [The revival of the Ethiopia-Djibouti railway line](#), France 24, 16 February 2018

¹⁵¹ Karoline Eickhoff and Nadine Godehardt, [China's Horn of Africa Initiative: Fostering or fragmenting peace?](#) [PDF], SWP (German Institute for International and Security Affairs, October 2022, based on [data collated](#) by the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies China Africa Research Initiative (SAIS-CARI).

¹⁵² [Chinese loans to Africa database](#), Boston University Global Development Policy Center, accessed 27 March 2024

¹⁵³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, [Xi Jinping meets with Prime Minister of Ethiopia Abiy Ahmed Ali](#), 17 October 2023

¹⁵⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, [Li Qiang holds talks with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali](#), 16 October 2023

¹⁵⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, [Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Affairs of the Foreign Ministry Xue Bing Visits Tigray Region of Ethiopia](#), 14 December 2023

¹⁵⁶ See for example [China rejects claims it bugged headquarters of African Union](#), The Guardian, 30 January 2018; [Exclusive: Suspected Chinese hackers stole camera footage from African Union](#), Reuters, 16 December 2020

Ethiopia's membership of the BRICS provides further opportunities for China to deepen relations and potentially develop common positions on international affairs.

China and Sudan

President Xi held talks with the chairman of Sudan's Sovereignty Council, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, on the sidelines of the first China-Arab States Summit in December 2022. At the time, the focus was on strengthening the China-Sudan strategic partnership.¹⁵⁷ China subsequently evacuated over 1,300 Chinese nationals after fighting began in Khartoum in April 2023. Beijing has maintained links with the Sovereignty Council, including a meeting between senior officials in November 2023.¹⁵⁸ China voted in favour of [UN Security Council resolution 2724](#), adopted 8 March 2024, which calls for an immediate cessation of hostilities during the month of Ramadan, and for all parties to the conflict to seek a sustainable resolution to the conflict through dialogue.¹⁵⁹

China and Eritrea

President Xi described strong relations with Eritrea as key to bolstering peace in the Horn of Africa during a meeting with Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki in Beijing in May 2023. During his visit, they discussed infrastructure construction and cooperation in telecommunications, agriculture, mining, fisheries and other fields. Isaias undertook military training in China in 1967.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, [Xi Jinping Meets with Chairman of Sudan's Sovereignty Council Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan](#), 9 December 2022. For more on the history of Chinese-Sudan relations, see [China seeks stronger ties with Sudan amid regional, international tug of war](#), Voice of America, 30 May 2023

¹⁵⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, [Wang Yi Meets with Deputy Chairman of Sudan's Sovereign Council Malik Agar](#), 2 November 2023

¹⁵⁹ UN News, Adopting Resolution 2724 (2024), [Security Council Calls for Immediate Cessation of Hostilities by Warring Parties in Sudan during Ramadan](#), 8 March 2024

¹⁶⁰ [Xi: Strong China-Eritrea ties part of keeping peace in Horn of Africa](#), Reuters, 15 May 2023

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