

The Evolving Presence of the United Arab Emirates in Ethiopia: Security Implications

Insight on Africa

1–18

© 2025 African Studies

Association of India

Article reuse guidelines:

in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india

DOI: 10.1177/09750878251352089

journals.sagepub.com/home/iaa**Dereje Melese Liyew**¹ 

Abstract

The evolving engagement of the Gulf States in the Horn of Africa has become an emerging determinant of the region's current and future security landscape. The United Arab Emirates' (UAE) active presence in the political economy of Ethiopia following the Ethiopia–Eritrea peace deal brings existing and potential security threats to Ethiopia and the wider Horn region. This study mainly tried to glean the political and security threats posed by the UAE's active presence in Ethiopia since 2018. This study employed a qualitative research approach with an exploratory research design. The primary and secondary data were thoroughly consulted. The study argues that given Ethiopia's age-old dispute with Egypt and Sudan—strategic, historical and religious alliance with the UAE over Nile River utilisation—the UAE is unlikely to be Ethiopia's strategic partner. The study also finds that the theocratic and undemocratic state experiences of the UAE, coupled with the de-institutionalised nature of bilateral relations, put the UAE at odds with Ethiopia's long-range national interests. The rival advent of Gulf States in the region also exposed Ethiopia and the Horn African states to potential proxy wars.

Keywords

Gulf States, security, threats, UAE, Ethiopia

Introduction

Contrary to traditional global actors (such as the USA, the United Kingdom, Italy and France), the Arab Gulf States¹ presence in the Horn of Africa is increasing at an alarming rate. The Arab Spring (Ding 2024), the war in Yemen since 2014 (Freer 2023) and intra-Gulf States' rivalries sharpened and accelerated the role

¹ Department of Political Science and International Relations, Debre Markos University, Debre Markos, Ethiopia

Corresponding author:

Dereje Melese Liyew, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Debre Markos University, Debre Markos, Ethiopia.

E-mails: dereje_melese@dmu.edu.et; zekiyos777@gmail.com

of the Gulf States' influence in the political economy of the Horn of Africa. The United States and other Western powers, partially distracted by the conflict in Ukraine and Gaza, have recently given less emphasis to the region, which in turn gives the Gulf States extra leverage to reshape the political landscape of the Horn of Africa. In other words, the growing reluctance of traditional powerbrokers in one way or another has helped Abu Dhabi and other emerging regional actors to easily penetrate the security and political platforms of the Horn of Africa (Yimer and Erko 2023).

Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states invest significantly through the establishment of military bases and ports, intervening or mediating conflicts, and via aid politics (Ding 2024) in the Horn of Africa. Indeed, their active presence in the Horn region began in the late 1990s in the form of conflict mediation.

Gulf States' involvement in the Horn of Africa has been dominated by Qatar and the UAE since the 2010s, with Saudi Arabia becoming involved mid-decade with the start of the war in Yemen (Freer 2023). The UAE, in particular, has emerged as one of the main external players in the affairs of the Horn of Africa since the 2011 Arab Spring (Yimer and Erko 2023).

Abu Dhabi has unlocked its involvement in the region through the principles of political alliance, aid politics, infrastructure building, port contracts and military base contracts. Its economic dimension is premised on the freedom of maritime navigation, including through Bab al-Mandab, the narrow passage from the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz (Crisis Group Middle East Briefings 2018). Politically, the UAE needs to dominate over the influence of other Gulf States' engagement in the region. On top of this, Long Ding (2024) argued that the UAE sees the Horn of Africa as an important strategic space for the projection of its influence, crowding out Qatar's presence in the region. Its involvement in the security of the Horn extended up to military intervention; the country, to some extent, asserted a more aggressive 'hard power' diplomacy that culminated in military intervention; the cases in Yemen, Syria and Libya are best witnesses (Nye Jr 2008). Overall, the geopolitical visibility of Gulf States in general and the UAE in particular in the Horn of Africa is boosted following the Ethiopia–Eritrea rapprochement with the active mediation role of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Since then, the Ethiopia–UAE bilateral relations have shown significant progress.

The formal and full diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and the UAE, especially in terms of economic dimensions, date back to the EPRDF regime in 2003 under the late Meles Zenawi's premiership (Yousuf 2021). However, it is only following the Ethiopia–Eritrea rapprochement under the auspices of the UAE and Saudi Arabia that bolstered their bilateral ties in multiple socioeconomic and political–security areas. Thus, the year 2018 witnessed the upgrading and deepening of bilateral relations between the two countries. The active role of Abu Dhabi in the Ethiopia–Eritrea peace deal scheme raises not only its global prestige but also paves a new milestone for Ethiopia–UAE bilateral relations. Since Abiy Ahmed assumed office in 2018, the UAE has backed his government to serve its own geopolitical interests.

At the heart of the UAE's engagements in Ethiopia lies the pressing need to secure its interests in the Red Sea and the Bab el Mandeb strait, a crucial choke point for global trade (El-Din 2024; Osman 2023). The UAE, an Islamic and monarchical state, is significantly funding multiple projects that have societal impacts and thus positions itself as a prime partner in Ethiopia's holistic growth history. To date, the UAE has been Ethiopia's second-largest trading partner in the Middle East region (Ding 2024).

The diplomatic relationships between the Horn of Africa states and the Gulf States, whereby the interest of the latter is primarily driven by short-term Middle Eastern security at the expense of the long-term regional development of the Horn of Africa (Meester et al. 2018), Ethiopia–UAE's relation potentially faces tough difficulties. More importantly, the UAE's strategic alliance with Arab League member states, particularly with Egypt and Sudan (potential and real enemies of Ethiopia over the usage of the Nile River), and its experience of military interventions in different states, including Yemen, Syria and, to some extent, Ethiopia, made UAE–Ethiopia relations tough business from the onset.

Scholars who are pessimists even consider Ethiopia–UAE relations as a threat to Ethiopia's long-term national interests, coming across at least three contentions. First, as long as Ethiopia's relations with Egypt and Sudan are hostile due to Nile River utilisation, the UAE is unlikely to become a strategic friend to Ethiopia (El-Din 2024; Osman 2023). This is because the Gulf States give a special place to the stability of Egypt to maintain the balance of power in the greater Middle East (Hellyer 2023). Second, the Ethiopia–UAE relation lacks institutional foundations. In this regard, Aditya Sarkar (2022) insisted that the foreign policy of Ethiopia post-2018 is characterised by de-institutionalisation and personalisation of both politics and foreign policymaking. Third, the political-cultural structures of the two states are asymmetric and otherwise incompatible. Islam is the UAE's official religion, and Sharia is its principal source of legislation (Loft 2024). In addition, the UAE does not conduct elections at the executive level, meaning that citizens do not have the right to change their government (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020), a bad example of democratic progress in Ethiopia.

In the middle of the aforementioned reservations, government elites from both sides and some other scholars pronounced the strategic partnership between Ethiopia and the UAE. The cooperation agreements signed during the visit of the President of the UAE in August 2023 demonstrate that the diplomatic relationship between the two countries is evolving into a strategic partnership.² The strategic agreements and memoranda of understanding signed in Addis Ababa between the UAE and Ethiopia are not a friendship project but rather a strategic shift that makes Ethiopia a vital space for the Emiratis in Africa.³ The frequent visits of high-ranking Ethiopian government officials to Abu Dhabi and vice versa are showcases of strategic relations, at least at face value.

The puzzle, however, is that given Ethiopia's age-old dispute with Egypt and Sudan (a strategic, historical and religious ally of the UAE) over Nile River utilisation, coupled with more personalised relations, how could the UAE be Ethiopia's strategic partner? Accordingly, this study attempts to glean potential costs and political–security threats otherwise of Ethiopia's relation with the

Arabic, monarchical, Islamic and undemocratic state of the UAE by triangulating its ties with Horn Africa–Arab states relations, particularly with Egypt and Sudan.

Research Methods and Materials

The study was conducted based on desktop reviews and interviews with policy analysts, regional security experts and government officials in the area at different levels. Primary data were gathered from official reports, televised programmes, press releases issued by both the Ethiopian and UAE governments, as well as memoranda of understanding. In addition, seven experts specialising in the geopolitics and security of the Horn of Africa were interviewed, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. During the interviews, a series of open-ended questions were posed to explore key themes. These included: Given the UAE's tight alliance with historic enemies of Ethiopia (Egypt and Sudan), how could the Ethiopia–UAE relation be strategic?; How does the UAE manage the divergent interests of Egypt and Sudan on one side and Ethiopia on the other regarding the utilisation of the Nile River? and What potential political and security risks could arise from the UAE's presence in Ethiopia's political landscape?

The study employed an exploratory research design, employing the qualitative research tradition that involves a politico-economic analysis to explore the phenomenon further. In addition to books and scholarly articles, memoranda of understanding signed between the two countries, press releases of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, senior scholars' commentary and media outlets on the issue under study were deeply consulted. To evaluate the accuracy and relevance of the data sources, the CRAAP test method was utilised.

The study thematically focuses on the geopolitical repercussions of the Gulf States (UAE) presence in the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia). The UAE's recent active involvement in Ethiopia's political economy following the Ethiopia–Eritrea peace deal and its threat to Ethiopia's long-run national interest are at the heart of this study. In terms of time framework, the study targets the post-2018 Ethiopia–UAE relation, the so-called start of strategic relations between the Abiy Ahmed and Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed regimes.

The primary data were analysed qualitatively through critical discourse analysis, while the data collected from secondary sources were analysed qualitatively through a systematic review.

Glance at the Ethiopia–UAE Historical Relations

Although the historical ties between Ethiopia and Gulf States date back to 615 AD (Jenber 2021), a time when followers of Prophet Mohammed fled to Axum, the relationship was unfriendly. Religion was among the primary and central causes; First, the Christian-centric domestic policies of Ethiopia and the pro-Islamic expansion policy of the Arab world made the relationship incompatible.

The second reason was Mussolini's anti-Christian propaganda. To realise his dream of colonising Ethiopia, he devised a strategy to create cleavage among Muslims and Christians and mobilise Muslim support. Mussolini tried to portray Ethiopia as a Christian kingdom that had oppressed its Muslim population and Islam (Erlich 1994). Besides, the Arab–Israel War and Ethiopia's tight support for Israel made Ethiopia's relations with the Muslim and Arab world full of tension and suspicion. The Arab world also supported anti-Ethiopian rebel groups in Eritrea, Somalia and so on (Jenber 2021). Thus, history shows that the Ethiopia–Arab Gulf State relationship was not amicable in the pre-1991 regimes.

The bilateral relationship between Ethiopia and the Emirates is a recent development. Before 2000, the UAE's investment in the Horn of Africa, including Ethiopia, was scant. The Ethiopia–UAE relation was unfavourable for a long period due to the UAE's close relation with ex-Ethiopia's foes, Eritrea and Somalia. Formal and diplomatic relations between the two countries commenced during the era of the late Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan and the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in 2003/4. It was only after the Arab Spring and the Yemen crisis that the involvement of the UAE and intra-Gulf States competition in the Horn was bolstered.

Despite the de-institutionalised and personalised nature of relations, the Ethiopia–Eritrea rapprochement laid down a new milestone in their diplomatic relations. Thus, 2018 witnessed a new era of bilateral relations between countries and regions. The active role of Abu Dhabi in the Ethiopia–Eritrea peace deal scheme raised its global visibility and paved the way for the new era of Ethiopia–UAE diplomatic relations. Following the Ethiopia–Eritrea rapprochement, the UAE's presence in Ethiopia has been manifested through dozens of memoranda of understanding and peripatetic diplomacy manifested by rapid, high-level diplomatic engagement through frequent travel.

The Geopolitical Interests of the UAE in Ethiopia

The UAE's huge presence in Ethiopia's political economy has been visible in the last seven or so years. To mention only some of the official engagements of the UAE's government in Ethiopia, following the Ethiopia–Eritrea rapprochement, the UAE has agreed to invest more than \$3 bn in Ethiopia (Ethiopia News Agency n.d.), an amount that puts the country on par with Egypt as a recipient of UAE assistance (International Crisis Group 2018). From the pledged aid and investment, \$1 bn was directly deposited into Ethiopia's central bank, while the rest, \$2 bn, was planned for investments in tourism, renewable energy and agriculture.

The two countries signed multiple memoranda of understanding, letters of intent and roadmaps. For instance, more than a dozen memoranda of understanding were signed between public and private entities in Addis Ababa during an official visit to Ethiopia by UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al Nahyan, and more than 120 Emirati companies are operating in the Ethiopian market (Sambidge 2023). On the other hand, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed confirmed that

the UAE government has given full scholarships to 273 Ethiopian students who achieved excellent results in the 2022 grade 12 exit exam (Fana Broadcasting Corporate 2023). Accordingly, 273 top-minded Ethiopian students have attended undergraduate programmes in the UAE's university curriculum. In recent times, a joint initiative between Ethiopia and the UAE dubbed '5 Million Ethiopian Coders' was also launched in Addis Ababa in the presence of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, his deputy Temesgen Tiruneh and senior officials from the UAE (Addis Standard n.d.). Thus, the UAE presents itself in Ethiopia through donation diplomacy and investment. According to Arabian Gulf Business Insight (Sambidge 2023), trade and investment growth has emerged on the back of years of aid provided by the UAE to Ethiopia, totalling more than \$5 bn.

The next question is that if the UAE has been engaged this much in post-2018 Ethiopia's political economy, what are the fundamental geopolitical motives behind its campaign? The answer to this question is not direct. The strategic interest of the UAE in the Horn of Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular can be clustered into three bold dimensions: economic, political and security.

Security

Gulf States' active involvement in the Horn of Africa politics following the Arab Spring and Yemen crisis is predominantly driven by regional security. Securing the Red Sea trade route stability is at the heart of their active engagement.

The UAE's political-economic interest in the Horn of Africa is directly related to maritime security. Ensuring stability in the Horn of Africa directly translates into maritime security for the UAE, given the region's proximity to these critical waterways. It has expanded its military network abroad and increased its geopolitical influence by establishing military bases and joint military training with several countries in the Horn of Africa. The UAE has established military bases in Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti (Ding 2024). The UAE's security involvement in the Horn of Africa ranges between conflict mediation and military intervention. The largest intervention did not occur in response to humanitarian or developmental demands but rather in response to political partnerships and military engagements that enabled the UAE to strengthen its alliance with the government (Cochrane 2021).

One of the frequently pronounced conflict mediation roles of the UAE, for instance, is the Ethiopia–Eritrea peace deal. The mediation of the Ethiopia–Eritrea conflict has opened potential economic opportunities to connect Eritrea ports with Ethiopia, which the UAE could then help to connect to its regional allies (Mohammed 2024). Even if the agreement is not well institutionalised and long-lasting, it allows the UAE to build a valuable network to expand its economic and political ties with Ethiopia. Thus, regardless of its effectiveness, the UAE harnessed the rapprochement as a means to promote its national interest in Ethiopia.

In contrast to conflict mediation, the UAE has been accused of unnecessary military intervention in internal conflicts. In line with this, Yimer and Erko (2023)

insisted that to empower the capacity of pro-Abu Dhabi local actors, the UAE uses tools such as military aid and military training instruments. The military training given to the Somali army between 2014 and 2018 and to the Puntland Maritime Police Force since 2010 by the UAE (Ribe 2020) are the best showcases.

In the war between the Ethiopian central government and the TPLF, the UAE is accused of providing drone support to the federal government of Ethiopia. Getachew Reda,⁴ interim president of Tigray's regional state, accused Abiy Ahmed's government of enlisting the support of UAE drones based in Assab. Of course, satellite images identified Emirati drones at Harar Meda Airport in Ethiopia and at a military base in Deir Dawa in the east of the country (New Arab n.d.). The UAE's intervention was an extension of its strategy to build an allied political and security system across the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, most notably following Houthi gains around Bab al-Mandab at the beginning of Yemen's conflict. An expert also insisted that 'following the active presence of the UAE in Ethiopia since 2018, Ethiopia's relation with neighboring countries significantly deteriorated, characterized by the formation of new alliances and rivalries against the national interest of Ethiopia'.⁵ In a nutshell, the UAE's military intervention in Ethiopia's internal politics is not only a bad experience for future bilateral relations but also a threat to Ethiopia's national interest and territorial integrity.

Economy

Given the Gulf States' sole dependence on oil exports, diversification of their economy in non-oil areas is a key reason for their active engagement in the Horn of Africa. The Nordic Africa Institute (2024) suggested that the 2008 global financial crisis, coupled with the inevitable decline of petroleum, obliged Gulf States to diversify their economies and secure strategic assets such as ports and agricultural land in the Horn of Africa. Thus, political and security interventions are means to achieve economic ends in the Horn regions and beyond.

The UAE's foreign policy continues to be guided by commercial interests, with diplomatic, humanitarian and security engagement aiming to enhance the country's international status and open up opportunities for Emirati firms. It is obvious that the UAE, of course, and other Gulf States too, have a weak agricultural base, little arable land and depend on imports for food (Ding 2024). So, Ethiopia is a strategic marketplace for the UAE, which is why hundreds of Emirati companies are functioning in Ethiopia. Ethiopia's diverse economy and immense agricultural potential, together with its enormous consumer base and labour force, attracted the UAE to establish robust relations with Ethiopia.

The UAE has become one of Ethiopia's top trading partners and is one of its four main export destinations. Its top three imports from Ethiopia in 2022, for instance, were raw gold, meat and coffee (Sambidge 2023). On 18 August 2023, for example, 17 agreements were signed during Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan's visit to Addis Ababa. These agreements are predominantly economic: port investment, technological cooperation, agriculture and maritime cargo handling

are among the economic concerns. Agriculture and livestock are important areas of trade cooperation between the two countries, and the UAE is Ethiopia's prime trading partner in the Middle East (Ding 2024). In sum, Abu Dhabi engaged in Ethiopia's economy aggressively, on the one hand, to increase its investment and, on the other hand, to create a safe trade route to import raw materials from Ethiopia and to export its finished products, in the same fashion as the colonial era.

Political

Political relations between Ethiopia and the Gulf States were not as strong as economic ties and were characterised by mutual suspicion. However, the regime transition in Ethiopia in 2018, on the one hand, and the Arab Spring and Yemen crisis on the other side, brought a new era of political alliance. Recently, the UAE and other Gulf States' ambitions to dominate the geopolitics of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea area are advancing significantly. They tried to harness shared history, culture and Islamic values to expand their political influence, advance their interests and outwit competitors (Gaid 2022).

Since 2018, the bilateral relationship between Ethiopia and the UAE has shifted from an economic relationship based on investment and trade to a multifaceted relationship led by a common understanding of issues of common interest at the regional and international levels. Of course, the political interest of the UAE is not separately considered from the economic and security dimensions. The UAE's growing desire to exploit the favourable economic conditions in Ethiopia, coupled with its desire to keep its regional competitors away from the region, encouraged Abu Dhabi to enhance its engagement in Ethiopia (Jenber 2020). On the part of Ethiopia, the internal dynamics compelled Abiy Ahmed's regime to approach the UAE in need of funds to handle a domestic financial crisis. So, the political-economic partnership was a deep interest to both sides of the incumbent regimes.

Ethiopia: A Battleground for Competing Interests of Gulf States

The Arab Gulf States, especially the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have competing interests and complex relations with Horn of Africa states. The competing nature of Middle East players' involvement, together with their growing appetite for military and economic presence in the Horn of Africa region, exacerbated the security complex of the region (Yimer and Erko 2023). The Gulf States extended the battlefield of competition between them to the Horn of Africa and are in tough competition with Iran and Turkey. This, in turn, put Horn governments in a difficult spot, forcing them to choose between the two Gulf axes or irritating local conflicts in new ways (Crisis Group Middle East Briefing 2018). In the same parlance, Ethiopia, nowadays, is under the track of potential and existing battlegrounds for rivalry.

The Gulf States have forced Horn of Africa countries to choose sides due to competition between them. It is thus a tough business for Ethiopia to accommodate the competing interests of major Gulf States players: Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. Besides, Ethiopia's diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries are significantly influenced by the Gulf States' involvement in the Horn of Africa, as they are influenced by the age-old experience of the Horn region: 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'.

Scholars insisted that the government's primary foreign patron, the UAE, has been funnelling arms and money to Ethiopia, as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have been doing the same to Eritrea, Somalia and the Sudanese Armed Forces, threatening to drag the region into a proxy conflict (de Waal and Berhe n.d.). On the other side, the UAE supports the Sudanese Rapid Force and the Somali political opposition (Ding 2024), which exacerbate internal conflict and antagonism with Ethiopia. Thus, the contrast between the roles of the Gulf powers in Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan is a big threat to regional security. While Saudi Arabia and the UAE share a common interest in countering Iranian influence, they are at odds regarding their approaches and long-term goals in the Horn. Turkey and Qatar, which are allied to counterbalance Saudi Arabia and the UAE, also have an active presence in Ethiopia's political economy.

The geopolitical rivalry of the Middle Eastern states is also replicated in the Horn of Africa, with Ethiopia at the heart. Accordingly, following Abiy Ahmed's promise to recognise Somaliland's independence, Somalia and Eritrea have begun to create an informal alliance, backed by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, against Ethiopia. Abiy's implicit support for Sudan's Rapid Special Force (RSF), backed by the UAE on the other side, could spark fighting with the Sudanese Armed Forces near the Ethiopian dam project (de Waal and Berhe n.d.). Given Ethiopia's age-old dispute with Egypt and Sudan over the Nile River, this is another threat to Ethiopia's national interests and territorial integrity.

The increased militarisation and the alignment of different Horn of Africa countries with rival Gulf powers raise concerns about political polarisation and the potential for intensifying existing conflicts in Ethiopia, as seen in Somalia. Although the UAE's involvement brings economic benefits to Ethiopia, it also carries significant risks, including the potential for increased instability and the erosion of sovereignty.

In recent geopolitical developments, there are at least two antagonistic players in Ethiopia's political economy, summarised in Figure 1.

Political–Security Threats to the UAE's Presence in Ethiopia

Ethiopia's recent diplomatic dance with the UAE has caught the attention of global and domestic observers, and as the relationship deepens, it brings to light a myriad of political and security threats to Ethiopia, of course, with scant economic advantages too. Accordingly, in this section, the major long- and

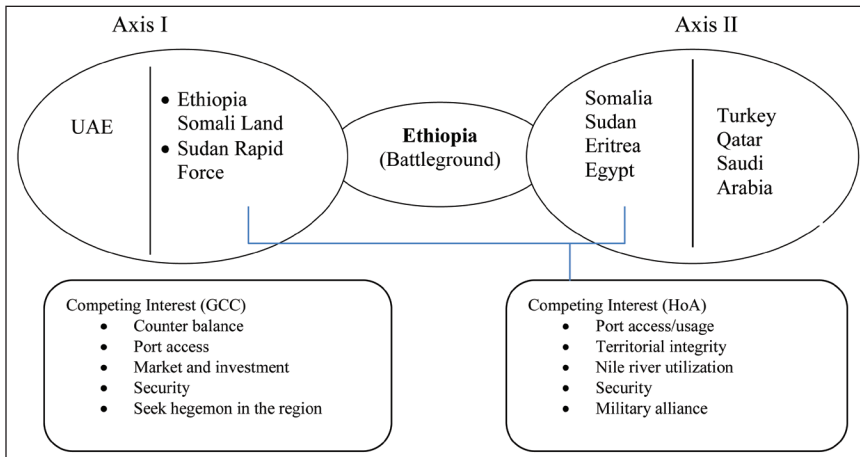


Figure 1. Ethiopia, a battlefield to the competing geopolitical interests of Gulf and Horn of Africa States.

Note: The competing and complex geopolitical relations of the Gulf and Horn of Africa States over Ethiopia's political economy cause.

short-range political and security threats to the UAE's active presence in Ethiopia are discussed exhaustively. The researcher also tried to show the less likely Ethiopia–UAE strategic relations.

Nile River and GERD

One of the most important determinants of Horn geopolitics is the Nile River hydro-politics, the age-old dispute between Ethiopia on the one hand and Egypt and Sudan on the other side over the fair utilisation of the Nile River. The Nile River in general and the GERD in particular is a litmus test that boldly determines the diplomatic relationship between Ethiopia and the UAE on the one hand and the UAE's relations with Egypt and Sudan on the other hand. One important question is which country is geo-strategically preferable to the UAE: Egypt or Ethiopia? Before answering this critical question, let us weigh the UAE–Egypt and Ethiopia–UAE historical and geopolitical ties.

The strong and multifaceted ties between Egypt and the UAE date back half a century. In October 2022, Egypt and the UAE celebrated the 50th anniversary of bilateral relations under the slogan 'Egypt and the UAE: One Heart' (El-Din n.d.). The strategic importance of Egypt for the Gulf States has been significant throughout history. Egypt has historically been a gateway for Gulf Arab political and economic actors to enter the rest of Africa, and as a geographical pivot seated between North Africa, the Horn, the Levant, the Red Sea and the Arabian Peninsula, its stability directly shapes the national security of Gulf States (Meester et al. 2018). In the same parlance, the importance of Egypt to the UAE's interest in the Horn of Africa is by no means compromised. The UAE's Ministry of Cabinet Affairs reported that the volume of non-oil trade between Egypt and the

UAE reached \$4.9 bn in 2022 (El-Din n.d.). ‘The UAE is the largest Arab investor in Egypt and the third globally, with a cumulative investment balance between 2003 and 2019 of more than \$28 billion (AED 102 billion)’ (El-Din n.d.). Besides Egypt’s strategic importance to the Arab world, including the UAE, in maintaining the regional balance of power, its cultural ties and Arab League membership give extra leverage for Egypt to be a prime ally to the UAE.

In contrast, Ethiopia’s relationship with the UAE and the Gulf States in general is a very recent development, predominantly characterised by a personal economic relationship since 2018. Thus, due to Egypt’s prime geopolitical importance to GCC members, they support Egypt’s claim on the filling of the dam and related issues, which is against Ethiopia’s national interest (Jenber 2021). This was evident in the Arab League’s blind support of Egypt, held in March 2020. The UAE by no means is about to sacrifice its relationship with Egypt for the sake of being in Ethiopia’s good graces (El Zobaidi n.d.). Contrary to Ethiopia’s interest, Egypt wishes to seize the opportunity of the presence of Abiy Ahmed and his special relationship with the UAE leadership, as well as his strong position at home, to make the dam a medium-sized detail awaiting settlement.

The inevitability of the conflict of interest between Ethiopia and Egypt over the Nile River forced the UAE to stand on either side. Given Egypt’s half-century diplomatic, historical, cultural and strategic ties with the UAE, Ethiopia is unlikely to be the UAE’s preferred ally at the expense of Egypt’s interest in the Nile River. An informant argued that ‘Nile River hydro-politics is the key determinant of the Ethiopia–UAE–Egypt relationship; Egypt seeks to leverage the current diplomatic ties between Ethiopia and the UAE to advance its long-standing interests regarding the use of the Nile River’.⁶ Accordingly, if we triangulate the relationship of Ethiopia–Egypt–UAE, Ethiopia may partially incur its interest in the Nile River to continue its strong ties with the UAE.

De-institutionalised Relations

Post-2018, Ethiopia’s foreign relations with Eritrea and the UAE, for instance, lack a strong institutional framework. In this regard, Aditya Sarkar (2022) noted that Ethiopia’s foreign policy since 2018 reflects a combination of Abiy Ahmed’s efforts to consolidate domestic power through a deeply personalised and de-institutionalised mode of conducting foreign affairs. Informants encounter tough criticism of Ethiopia–UAE diplomatic relations:

Ethiopia’s foreign relation with neighboring states and regional powers under Abiy Ahmed’s premiership is highly influenced by personal instincts. The prime minister is the sole designer of external relations at the expense of institutional norms. The near-aborted Ethiopia–Eritrea rapprochement witnesses this reality. In the same parlance, the Ethiopia–UAE recent relationship lacks solid institutional guidelines.⁷

The de-institutionalisation and personalisation of both politics and foreign policymaking and the associated use of foreign policy to shape domestic

action will potentially distract Ethiopia from achieving its overall diplomatic goals. The prime minister's unilateral decision-making and policy-planning style sometimes wrong-footed Ethiopia's foreign and security institutions (Mosley 2020).

If we glance at the Ethiopia–Eritrea peace deal, the Pretoria TPLF-central government agreement, and Ethiopia–UAE recent diplomatic ties, the involvement of the general public, the role of regional institutions and the role of the parliament are in doubt. Was the content of the agreements made public? Are foreign policy decisions explicitly debated? Are important domestic actors well consulted? Such critical concerns are poorly addressed.

The diplomatic relation between Ethiopia and the UAE is highlighted by the free will of the two top leaders: Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Regional institutions like the AU and IGAD have been sidelined as Abiy Ahmed has assumed the role of a populist peacemaker in the region. In addition, domestic actors, except a few ministers, have a very scant involvement in the current huge ties between Ethiopia and the UAE.

Religion

Politics can control religious institutions and, on the other hand, control politics (Moyser 2002). Religion is a critical soft power harnessed for the consolidation of geopolitical relations between the Horn of Africa and the Gulf States, with Islam at the heart. In the Horn of Africa region, the Gulf States and their allies leverage their shared history, culture and Islamic values to expand their influence, advance their interests and outwit competitors (Gaid 2022). Unlike other Horn African states like Egypt, Somalia and Sudan, Islamism and Arabism are not a common denominator for the UAE and Ethiopia.

In contrast to the modern secular state, the UAE is an Islamic and monarchical state. According to the constitution of the UAE, Islam is the country's official religion, and Sharia is the principal source of legislation.⁸ In addition, the UAE 2022 international religious freedom report shows that private and government-run radio and television stations frequently broadcast Islamic programming, including sermons and lectures; they did not feature similar content for other religious groups. Therefore, the UAE undisputedly harnesses Islamic thoughts and dogmas to legitimise political power and its foreign relations with the outside world (Baycar and Rakipoglu 2022). The UAE's small-state strategy also includes promoting Islam both domestically and throughout the region (Kourgiotis 2020).

Besides the UAE's theocratic state structure, back in history, the GCC members developed anti-Ethiopian sentiment and supported separatist movements that undermined the territorial integrity of Ethiopia in the name of liberating Eritrea and Somalia from Christian domination (Jenber 2021). The age-old siege mentality of leaders and Christian Ethiopians by the Arab world shall not be underestimated. Thus, there is no good record of religious relations between the two countries in history.

Given the UAE's Islamism and Arabism guiding principles, in a country where more than half the population of the country is Christian, public diplomacy will face acute challenges. Informants insisted that

The very intention of the Gulf States' presence in Ethiopia is not solely economic or security but also with an intent to Arabize and Islamize Ethiopia. It is the age-old wish of Egyptians, as frequently pronounced by their leaders. Similarly, the UAE, a country guided by sharia law beyond its economic interest, has a clear interest in expanding Islam in Ethiopia. This will be a threat to non-Muslim Ethiopians.⁹

Accordingly, the active presence of the UAE in the past seven years is full of suspicion among Christian communities. Its institutionally supported pro-Islam domestic policy will potentially extend to other countries, such as Ethiopia. The accusation of the Prosperity regime of its multifaceted oppression against the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (Liyew 2024), coupled with the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council's quest for Arab League membership, exacerbates public suspicion. In addition to inter-religious difficulties, the UAE may also pose intra-religious challenges in the Muslim communities. According to Ajú and Ylönen (2022), Salafism and Salafisizing Ethiopian Sufism are the main Islamic religious sectarians supported and used by the UAE. The religious policy of the UAE, therefore, is not compatible with Christian and Sufi Muslims, a significant portion of Ethiopia's population.

UAE: A Bad Example of Democracy

The Ethiopian and UAE governance models are in stark contrast, especially concerning basic tenets. The UAE is a highly theocratic and authoritarian monarchy with a negligible and affluent population, while Ethiopia is a secular developing country with a nascent parliamentary democracy, one that has bouts of serious authoritarian tendencies.

The UAE is a dynastic, monarchical and Islamic state under the leadership of seven hereditary family lines. As stated in the preamble of the amended 2009 constitution of the UAE, the rulers of the Emirates include Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Um Al Quwain and Fujairah, chosen from among their family members.

In the UAE, there are no legal channels where political opposition can be expressed, political parties are forbidden, and civil societies are non-existent. According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2024 report, the state does not conduct any elections at the executive level; thus, citizens do not have the right to change their government. In addition, the report revealed that each of the seven individual emirates is ruled by a hereditary family, with the leader chosen from among the tribe's family members. The political landscape of the UAE is forbidden for political parties, trade unions and other civic society organisations. Political powers in the UAE are solely concentrated on the individual ruling royal families. The UAE is an authoritarian government, with

power completely centralised within the ruling families of the individual emirates. According to the Freedom House 2024 report, the UAE is categorised as a not-free state with an 18 out of 100% score. The civil liberty and political rights of citizens and non-citizens are subject to significant restrictions.

The threat then is that the growing ties with the UAE could undermine Ethiopia's commitment and effort to nurturing democratic institutions. Achieving a delicate equilibrium between economic collaboration, security interests and democratic values will define Ethiopia's economic trajectory. Democracy is a century-long quest for Ethiopians, yet not well-installed. Meanwhile, Ethiopia's deepening relations with the UAE, a country with a tough authoritarian regime, will have negative repercussions. The challenge lies in avoiding compromises that might undermine the democratic foundations that the nation aspires to uphold. An expert in the area argues that 'UAE is an extremely undemocratic state and is a bad example to democratic progress that potentially holds back Ethiopia's effort to install democratic institutions'.¹⁰ In this backdrop, it seems enough to argue that the UAE is not a strategic ally to Ethiopia and the Horn states to install democratic institutions.

Threat of Proxy War

The Gulf powers have engaged in unhealthy rivalry while seeking to project geopolitical influence and pursuing regional order in an unstable and conflict-prone neighbourhood (Gaid 2022). Their recent presence in the Horn of Africa in general and in Ethiopia in particular is manifested not by cooperation but rather by tight competition and counterbalance. Abu Dhabi's growing interest in dominating the geopolitical landscape of the Horn region would end up further importing the Gulf crisis to the Horn of Africa (Yimer and Erko 2023). The UAE's active presence in Ethiopia's political–security area posed real and potential conflicts. The conflict in Sudan between the RSF and the national army, in which the UAE sponsored the RSF, could be described as a Proxy War (BL News 2025).

The deadly Civil War between the central government led by Abiy Ahmed and the TPLF was partly due to the de-institutionalised Ethiopia–Eritrea rapprochement under the active mediation role of the UAE. According to the 2022 East Africa Report of the Institute for Security Studies, mediation efforts by the UAE and Saudi Arabia were successful between Ethiopia and Eritrea; however, the consequence of the rapprochement has been disastrous, resulting in the onset of the Tigray War (Gaid 2022). In the Civil War, Abu Dhabi was involved on the side of the central government by providing drones and other military support.

The recent rivalry between the roles played by the Gulf States and neighbouring states in Ethiopia and Somalia posed a security threat to Ethiopia and the region at large. Primarily, the new rift between Somalia and the UAE is most likely going to deepen over time, while the Emirati support continues for the regional administrations in Somaliland (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies 2018). Second, the geopolitical rivalry between the Gulf States and Iran and Turkey extends to the Horn of Africa (Ding 2024). Third, in January 2024, the leaders of Ethiopia and Somaliland—a territory seeking independence from Somalia—signed a memorandum

of understanding granting Addis Ababa 50-year access to a strip of coastline on the Gulf of Aden (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2024). In response, on 10 October 2024, the leaders of Egypt, Eritrea and Somalia solidified their regional alliance, with a focus on countering Ethiopia's influence in the Horn of Africa (Geopolitical Monitor n.d.).

Based on the above premise, Ethiopia and Somalia are on the verge of a Proxy War, whereby the UAE and Somaliland, on the side of Ethiopia and Eritrea, and Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and possibly Sudan are on the side of Somalia. Such power projections could potentially make Ethiopia a hot battleground between and among Gulf States, the Middle East and superpowers.

Concluding Remarks

The Gulf States' advent in the Horn of Africa has posed significant political and security implications in the Horn of Africa region. Although the Gulf States' presence in the region opens avenues for economic cooperation and investment opportunities for Horn African states, the security implications are a big deal. Tough intra-Gulf States' rivalries over multiple geopolitical interests in the Horn of Africa make their presence in the region a threat to the Horn of Africa's security.

The UAE is the prime Gulf State with the intent to dominate the geopolitics of the Horn of Africa region. The active presence of the UAE in Ethiopia's political economy is boldly witnessed following the Ethiopia–Eritrea rapprochement backed by Samsonite diplomacy. The economic and technological opportunities that Ethiopia accrues from the bilateral relations shall not be underestimated. However, given Ethiopia's vital geostrategic location in the region, the security implications of Gulf States' active involvement in the Horn of Africa and Ethiopia are serious security issues. Gulf States and other regional powers' unhealthy competition in Ethiopia is an additional security threat to the conflict-prone region.

The UAE's intent to be part of the whole growth story of Ethiopia brings potential and existing security threats. The recent agreement between Egypt, Eritrea and Somalia with Ethiopia provides a practical example. More importantly, the personalised nature of the bilateral relation, the rival existence of the Gulf States in the region, Ethiopia's dispute with Egypt over the Nile River, the bad democratic experience of the UAE and cultural asymmetry position the UAE at odds with Ethiopia's overall national interest.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Dereje Melese Liyew  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4200-3619>

Notes

1. Gulf States in this context include GCC member states: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman. The study, however, focuses on the UAE's security implications in Ethiopia.
2. Professor Brook Hailu, Senior Advisor at the African Leadership Excellence Academy, told Ethiopia News Agency (ENA), on 31 August 2023.
3. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates, and Abiy Ahmed, Prime Minister of Ethiopia, attend the inauguration of the Water and Energy Exhibition, at the Ethiopian Science Museum in Addis Ababa, 18 August 2023.
4. Getachew Reda, interim president of Tigray Regional State on his official X page, 20 November 2020.
5. A telephone interview with an expert on Horn of Africa Security and CEO of an NGO based in Ethiopia, interviewed on 28 May 2025.
6. Key informant interview with an assistant professor of Political Science and researcher on the Nile hydro politics, interviewed on 24 March 2025, Bahir Dar.
7. An interview with a lecturer and researcher of peace and Security studies at Gondar University, 7 October 2024.
8. Article 7 of the 2009 amended constitution of UAE.
9. An interview with an assistant professor of peace and security studies, at Bahir Dar University, 14 December 2024.
10. Interview with Lecturer and Researcher of Political Science at Hawassa University, Ethiopia, 25 October 2024.

References

- Addis Standard. n.d. 'Ethiopia, UAE Launch "5 Million Ethiopian Coders" Initiative in Addis Abeba'. *Ethio Explorer*. <https://www.ethioexplorer.com/ethiopia-uae-launch-5-million-ethiopian-coders-initiative-in-addis-abeba/>
- Ajú, M. M., and A. Ylönen. 2022. 'The Middle East and Eastern Africa Intersected: Discussing Contemporary Connections'. *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos* no. 43: 13–39.
- Baycar, H., and M. Rakipoglu. 2022. 'The United Arab Emirates' Religious Soft Power through Ulema and Organizations'. *Religions* 13, no. 7: 646.
- Bertelsmann Stiftung. 2020. *BTI 2020 Country Report: United Arab Emirates*. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung.
- BL News. 2025, May. 'From Proxy War to Direct Aggression: The UAE's Role in Sudan's Crisis and the Expected Role of the International Community'. *BL News*. <https://blnews.net/2025/05/from-proxy-war-to-direct-aggression-the-uaes-role-in-sudans-crisis-and-the-expected-role-of-the-international-community/>
- Cochrane, L. 2021. 'The United Arab Emirates as a Global Donor: What a Decade of Foreign Aid Data Transparency Reveals'. *Development Studies Research* 8, no. 1: 49–62.
- de Waal, Alex, and Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe. n.d. 'Ethiopia Back on the Brink: How Abiy's Reckless Ambition—and Emirati Meddling—Are Fueling Chaos in the Horn'. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ethiopia/ethiopia-back-brink>
- Ding, L. 2024. 'The Evolving Roles of the Gulf States in the Horn of Africa'. *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 1–14.

- El Zobaidi, Haitham. n.d. 'UAE-Ethiopia Ties, a Golden Opportunity for Egypt'. *The Arab Weekly*. <https://theArabweekly.com/uae-ethiopia-ties-golden-opportunity-egypt>
- El-Din, G. E. 2024. *Egypt and the UAE*. <https://www.eurasiareview.com/22082023-uaes-strategic-investment-and-maritime-engagement-in-landlocked-ethiopia-vision-or-ambition-oped/>
- El-Din, Gamal Essam. n.d. 'Egypt and the UAE'. *Al-Ahram Weekly*. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1201/518513/AlAhram-Weekly/Egypt/Egypt-and-the-UAE.aspx>
- Erlich, H. 1994. 'Islam, War, and Peace in the Horn of Africa'. *Muslim Ethiopia 2002*: 187.
- Erlich, H. 2013. 'Islam, War, and Peace in the Horn of Africa'. In *Muslim Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics, and Islamic Reformism*, 187–199. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ethiopia News Agency (ENA). n.d. 'UAE to Invest Over 3 bln USD in Ethiopia'. *ENA*. https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/en_1351
- Fana Broadcasting Corporate. 2023, February 28. 'PM Abiy Confirms 273 Best-Achieving Ethiopian Students Received Full Scholarships from UAE'. *Fana Broadcasting Corporate*. <https://www.fanabc.com/english/pm-abiy-confirms-273-best-achieving-ethiopian-students-received-full-scholarships-from->
- Freer, C. 2023. *The Gulf States Mediating in the Horn of Africa: For Domestic or Regional Consumption?* PeaceRep.
- Gaid, S. 2022. 'Gulf Soft Power in the Horn Competition vs Cooperation'. *ISS East Africa Report 2022* no. 46: 1–16.
- Geopolitical Monitor. n.d. 'The Egypt-Eritrea-Somalia Alliance: A Strategic Counterbalance to Ethiopia'. *Geopolitical Monitor*. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/the-egypt-eritrea-somalia-alliance-a-strategic-counterbalance-to-ethiopia/>
- Hellyer, H. A. 2023. *Egypt's stability is the GCC's top priority in the region*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/egypt-stability-gcc-priority/>
- International Crisis Group. 2018. *The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa*. Middle East Briefing. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/united-arab-emirates/b65-united-arab-emirates-horn-africa>
- International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). 2024, March. 'The Ethiopia–Somaliland Deal'. *Strategic Comments*. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2024/03/the-ethiopia-somaliland-deal/>
- Jenber, B. J. 2021. 'Evolving Ethio-Gulf Economic and Political Relations: The Challenges and Opportunities'. *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 9, no. 10: 267–287.
- Kourgiotis, P. 2020. "'Moderate Islam" made in the United Arab Emirates: Public Diplomacy and the Politics of Containment'. *Religions* 11, no. 1: 43.
- Liyew, D. M. 2025. 'The Politics of Secularism in Ethiopia: Repression and Co-option Towards the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church'. *Insight on Africa* 17, no. 2: 195–212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09750878241301331>
- Loft, P. 2024. *United Arab Emirates (UAE): Introductory Country Profile*. Commons Library Research Briefing. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9586/CBP-9586.pdf>
- Meester, J., W. Van den Berg, and H. Verhoeven. 2018. *Riyal Politik: The Political Economy of Gulf Investments in the Horn of Africa*. Netherlands Institute of International Relations' Clingendael.
- Mohammed, M. S. 2024. 'The Red Sea Regional Security Complex: The Implications of the Red Sea Forum for Ethiopian National Security'. *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 1–17.
- Moyser, G. 2002. *Politics and Religion in the Modern World*. Routledge.

- Nordic Africa Institute. 2024, September 20. 'A New Era of Engagement: Gulf Countries and the Horn of Africa'. *Nordic Africa Institute*. <https://nai.uu.se/stories-and-events/news/2024-09-20-a-new-era-of-engagement-gulf-countries-and-the-horn-of-africa.html>
- Nye Jr, J. S. 2008. 'Public Diplomacy and Soft Power'. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1: 94–109.
- Osman, I. D. 2023. *UAE's Strategic Investment And Maritime Engagement In Landlocked Ethiopia: Vision Or Ambition? – OpEd*. <https://www.eurasiareview.com/22082023-uaes-strategic-investment-and-maritime-engagement-in-landlocked-ethiopia-vision-or-ambition-oped/>
- Sambidge, Andy. 2023. 'Aid Turns to Trade as UAE Plans Ethiopia Investments'. *AGBI*. <https://www.agbi.com/analysis/trade/2023/08/aid-turns-to-trade-as-uae-plans-ethiopia-investments/>
- Sarkar, A. 2022. *Two-level Game or the Primacy of Domestic Politics? Ethiopia's Regional Foreign Policy After 2018*. Peacerep Working Paper. <https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Ethiopia-Working-Paper-Foreign-Policy-After-2018.pdf>
- The New Arab. n.d. 'UAE, Turkey, and Iran: Why Rival Powers Are Backing Ethiopia's Government'. *The New Arab*. <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/why-rival-powers-are-backing-ethiopias-government>
- Yimer, N. A., and H. G. Erko. 2023. 'Middle East: States Rivalry in the Horn of Africa. Key Drives, Geopolitical Implications, and Security Challenges'. *Conflict Studies Quarterly* no. 44.
- Yousuf, M. 2021. *Ethio–UAEs' Relations: A Critical Analysis of Opportunities and Challenges for Ethiopian*. MA Thesis. Addis Ababa University.