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External Powers in the Horn of Africa: The Case of Iran

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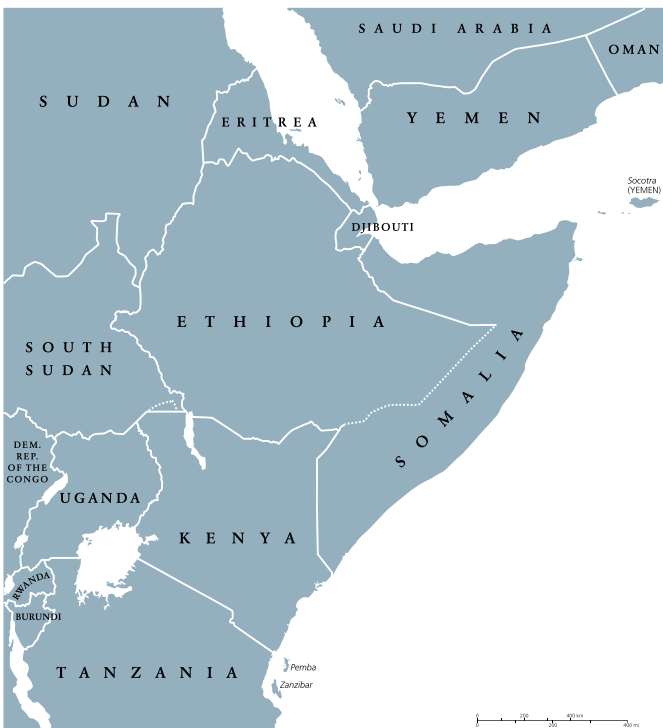
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Summary

- Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and the Sudan are located along vital shipping routes, including the Red Sea, the Bab el Mandeb, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. At the same time, many states in the Horn of Africa are faced with institutional, economic and security challenges.
- Due to the strategic importance and a reliance on external support, many global, regional and local actors contribute to the Horn's security environment. But external actors and local governments often have different ideas about what the bilateral relationships brings.
- As a result, these relations tend to be based on an uncomfortable interdependence and find themselves prone to frequent realignments, as the Horn of Africa is a place in which diplomatic ties tend to be volatile and hardly ever exclusive.
- While global powers such as the US, Russia, Europe and China are still very present in the region, given the current issues, regional actors including Israel, Iran, the Arab Gulf states and Turkey seem to be playing an increasingly important role in shaping dynamics in the Horn.
- The Horn is a region of interest to GCC countries due to its strategic importance for energy and other maritime trade, its proximity to Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, its vulnerability to extremism and its role in contributing to food security.
- The aftermath of the Arab uprisings, the Iran nuclear deal and the war in nearby Yemen, have changed the regional security environment. Diplomatic positioning in the Horn takes increasingly place along positions on extremism and political Islam, and how to deal with Iran.
- Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was the first Iranian leader to really try to raise his country's profile in Africa. While Iranian trade relations with the African continent grew, Iran was relatively unsuccessful in winning any hearts and minds.
- Iran's biggest 'clients' tend to be non-state actors, states that are internationally isolated or states that flirt with Iran as part of a negotiation strategy with other external powers, the US and the Gulf states in particular.
- The war in Yemen, the competition with Saudi Arabia, and the ambition to build up naval capabilities have nonetheless again increased Iran's attentiveness to the countries of the Horn. Still, in the bigger picture, Tehran has not much constructive to offer to national state authorities.
- In January 2016, the Republic of the Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia broke off relations with Iran following the attack on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, showing a trend towards alignment with the Arab Gulf states and away from Iran.
- While post-colonial states used to warm to Iran's anti-Western rhetoric, the Horn remains wary of Iran's attempts to spread its revolutionary agenda and its religious beliefs in the region.
- The other key obstacle to Iran gaining a solid foothold in the Horn has been the countermeasures by other external actors, including Israel, the US and several Gulf states, which are willing to actively block the further spread of Iranian influence.

The Issue

States in the Horn of Africa are typically faced with a range of challenges. These differ from country to country, but range from economic hardship, to faith-based extremism, to weak national institutions and even limitations on sovereign control over territory. The failed state of Somalia is at the region's core, and the region has been prone to intrastate, interstate and proxy conflicts. At the same time, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and the Sudan are located along vital shipping routes, including the Red Sea, the Bab el Mandeb, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean.



(MAP SOURCE: Peter Hermes Furian, via Shutterstock)

External powers have long been eager to increase their own influence in the region while keeping the influence of rivals in check. As a result, the complex dynamics of the Horn are shaped by a multitude of global, regional and local actors and interests. From a diplomatic perspective, this has generated a changeable pattern of frequent realignments in bilateral relations, temporary friendships and quasi-alliances.

Such realignments are often triggered by a change in the balance of power or a change in prioritization at the global or the regional level. Reasons for diplomatic realignments could be found in the Cold War, the end of the Cold War, the start of the US-led Global War on Terror (GWOT) and more recently the outbreak of conflicts in the Middle East, the nuclear deal with Iran, and the war in Yemen. The latest of such diplomatic shifts came to the surface as the Republic of the

Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia broke off relations with Iran following the attack on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran in January 2016.

With a specific focus on Iran, this EDA Insight assesses the interactions and realignments between external and local actors in the Horn of Africa. It analyses Iran's attempt to build up influence in the Horn and assesses the degree of success it has had in doing so, while at the same time explaining the reasons for Iran's (in)ability to become a key player in the region. The analysis presented in this brief is based on a review of the literature and draws on open-source research only.¹

Why is it important from a GCC perspective?

- The Horn of Africa is a region of interest to the GCC countries due to: its strategic importance for energy and other maritime trade; its proximity to Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt; its vulnerability to extremism; and its role in contributing to food security. The establishment of UAE strategic naval facilities in the region reflects this importance.
- Understanding the internal and external dynamics of the Horn of Africa, including the role of Iran in these, is useful for policy-makers who are engaged in shaping relations with the respective countries in the Horn, be they political, economic, humanitarian or military-strategic.
- With the international political agenda focused predominantly on the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, raising awareness of developments in the Horn of Africa is useful, not least given that parts of the region are experiencing increased ethnic and religious tensions.

The Horn and External Powers: An Uncomfortable Interdependence

The states located in the Horn of Africa struggle with an array of institutional and socio-economic problems. Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Sudan and Somalia are all classified by the UN as 'Least Developed Countries'.² For the past years, the Horn has shown both absolute and per capita economic growth. For instance, Eritrea's GNI per capita increased from US\$200 in 2000 to US\$480 in 2011 and Sudan's GNI per capita rose from US\$320 in 2000 to US\$1,950 in 2015.³ In practice though, conflicts and droughts have fueled famines and have displaced many.

Indisputably, corruption is a major source of the countries' problems and exacerbates the ability to build constructive relations with external donors. To illustrate, *Transparency International* listed Somalia as number 167 out of 168 on its most recent corruption index (2015), Sudan occupied number 165 and Eritrea stood at 154.⁴ Social misery and visible inequality have indeed created fertile ground for recruitment in criminal networks including piracy, as well as for ethnic and faith-based radicalization, extremism and terrorism.⁵

In parts of the region, authorities enjoy only limited sovereignty and armed groups hold sway over large territories.⁶ Somalia's Al-Shabaab, loyal to Al-Qaeda, remains an extremely active terrorist organization and has recently been expanding its activities northward.⁷ At the same time, Islamic State has stepped up attacks in the Somali region of Puntland.⁸ Conflicts are ongoing in the Sudan and South Sudan and Ethiopia, as so many other countries, is struggling with its own domestic radicalization problems.⁹

Given these difficult fundamentals, the Horn has proven a challenging environment to forge constructive and lasting bilateral ties for outside powers. Such relations are not necessarily based on shared interests, as illustrated in Figure 1. As a result, the dynamics between local actors in the Horn and external powers tend to be based on an uncomfortable interdependence. The result has been a history (and present) of often shifting alignments and many fluid, quasi-alliances that are rather transactional and hardly ever exclusive.¹⁰

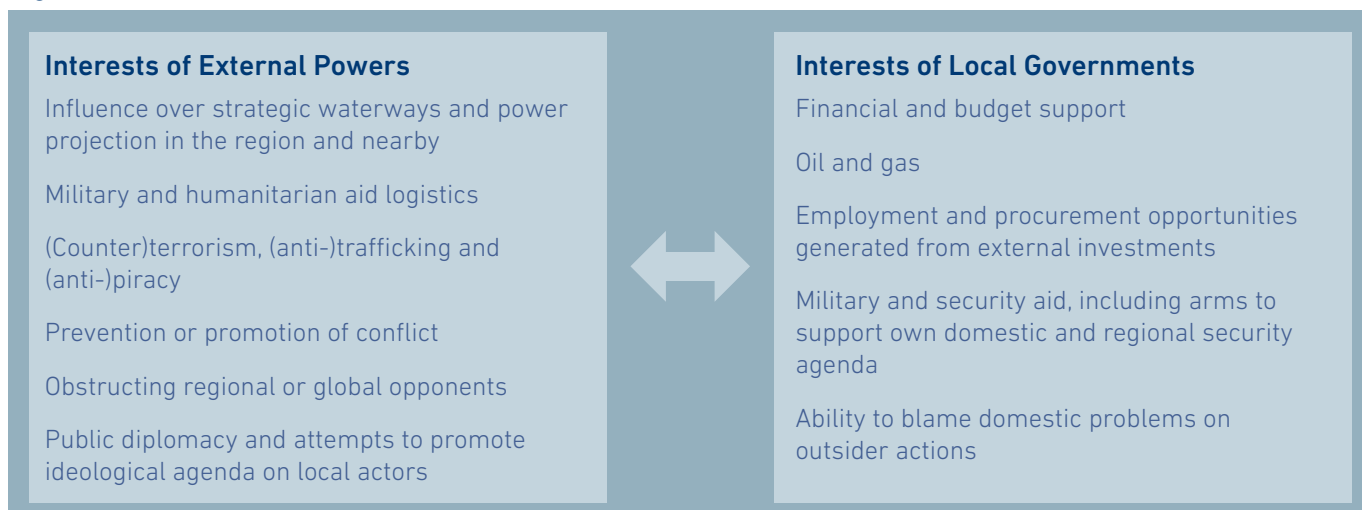
A History of Fluid Bilateral Realignments

The diplomatic relations and dynamics of the Horn of Africa live up to the stereotype that there are 'no permanent friends and no permanent enemies'. The following historical episodes illustrate the region's political volatility:

- During the Cold War, US-backed states were pitched against Soviet-backed states. Both superpowers focused on the two rival states of Ethiopia and Somalia, which fought over the irredentist region of Ogaden. At the end of the 1970s, Ethiopia switched from being the US's staunchest ally to being friends with the Soviets. Somalia went instead from being strongly in Moscow's camp to joining the US's side.
- At the regional level, proponents of Arab nationalism competed with more Western-leaning regimes. During the Eritrean War for Independence (1961-1991), Israel supported Ethiopia against Eritrea to prevent the Red Sea from becoming 'an Arab Lake'. Various Arab countries backed Eritrea instead and assumed that an independent Eritrea would adopt a pro-Arab foreign policy. But when independence was realized in 1993, Eritrea initially opted for close ties with Israel, the US and Ethiopia, with only observer status in the Arab League.
- The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran brought another fault line to the region. It sparked tensions between those in favour of secular state institutions and those eager to adopt a more religion-focused system of governance. The most fundamental change within the region took place in the Sudan: after the overthrow of the regime of Jaafar al Nimeiri in 1986 and the rise of the Islamists, the Sudan went from being pro-Iraq to being pro-Iran during the 1980-1988 Iraq-Iran War.

A more recent wave of realignments occurred with the end of the Cold War and soon after, the rise of extremism and the launch of the Global War on Terror. The authorities of Ethiopia, Djibouti and Eritrea immediately backed the GWOT. Sudan, on the other hand, decided to support local Islamic groupings in neighboring countries, but also hosted more regionally active groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas and al-Qaeda.

Figure 1



Djibouti in particular rose to the forefront as it was open to hosting the military bases of a range of external powers, including the only permanent US base in Africa. China has reportedly started the construction of its first ever overseas military base, while Djibouti also hosts Japanese, US and French navies, among others.¹¹ And Saudi Arabia is finalizing a deal with the Djibouti authorities to set up a base.¹²

The aftermath of the Arab uprisings that started in 2011, the signing of a nuclear deal with Iran and the war in nearby Yemen, have changed the regional security environment once again. At the moment, the fault lines along which national governments in the Horn of Africa and external actors position themselves tend to fall along opinions on extremism and political Islam, and how to deal with Iran. While global powers such as the US, Russia, Europe and China are still very present in the region, given the issues, regional actors including Israel, Iran, the Arab Gulf states and Turkey seem to be playing an increasingly important role in shaping dynamics in the Horn.

Iran as an External Power in the Horn of Africa

Just like other external actors in the region, Iran is interested in advancing its political, military-strategic, economic and ideological interests. In addition, given its international isolation, showing strength in any other part of the world was useful in persuading domestic audiences to believe in the viability of the Islamic Republic. Iranian interest in Africa has so far not eclipsed its focus on the Middle East or West Asia. Nonetheless, the war in Yemen, the competition with Saudi Arabia, and the ambition to build up naval capacities have increased Iran's attentiveness for the countries of the Horn.

Iran's involvement with the Horn of Africa region started properly after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini and his regime were eager to sympathize with any subversive group that claimed to fight under the banner of 'Islam'. At the same time, given Iran's international isolation, Africa was considered useful as a buyer of oil and a supplier of all kinds of goods, including uranium to satisfy Tehran's nuclear ambitions. In addition, African states had the potential to be useful to Iran with their votes in the United Nations, which Iran needed to be lifted out of isolation.

Initially, revolutionary Iran was utterly unsuccessful in wooing individual governments in the Horn of Africa. It tried with Somalia, but relations deteriorated quickly after Somali President Siad Barre accepted millions

of dollars in financial and military aid from the US in exchange for military access rights. During the Iraq-Iran War, only the radical regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam in Ethiopia and the government in South Yemen expressed support for Iran. Sudan would switch sides after the fall of Nimeiri in 1986.

The first Iranian leader to really try to raise the country's profile in Africa was Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.¹³ During his presidency, the number of visits to Africa increased and so did the number of agreements signed on paper. To circumvent bilateral hostilities, Ahmadinejad would use the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation as contexts to set up visits in Africa, including in the Horn.¹⁴ While he was successful in increasing Iranian trade relations with the African continent, he was relatively unsuccessful in winning any hearts and minds.

Iran and the Sudan

The political, Islamic revolution that took place in the 1980s in the Sudan changed the fortunes of Iran in the Horn of Africa slightly. Only several years prior, Khartoum had ordered the closure of Tehran's diplomatic mission as part of its support for Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War. The 1986 regime change in Sudan led to the reopening of the mission. However, the real shift towards Iran was made as a consequence of the 1990-1991 Gulf War. Sudan refused to condemn Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, which resulted in the expulsion of Sudanese workers from the Gulf countries and the suspension of military aid from the US. The vacuum and the gap in funding provided a strategic opening for Iran to step into.

The Sudanese-Iranian relationship was partly constructed on shared ideology, but most importantly on pragmatic reasoning. For both, the relationship meant cracking international isolation. In addition, for Tehran, it meant the ability to open new markets for oil and access to a third country through which it could channel assistance to subversive groups in the region. The Sudan's wrecked economy benefited as well, as did its military. In December 1991, Tehran agreed to finance Khartoum's purchase of an estimated \$300 million worth of arms from China.¹⁵ In 1993, Iranian military helped restructure the Sudanese security forces.¹⁶

Until recently, the Sudan was Iran's most important ally in the region, even though Sudan also entertained good relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states that have invested heavily in Sudan's agriculture sector, among other sectors.¹⁷ However, Khartoum became uncomfortable with Iran's attempts to promote Shi'ism in the country, including through Iran's cultural centers, and from 2014 onwards, Sudan started to lean more and more towards the

side of Riyadh. In 2015, Sudan joined the Coalition to restore the legitimate government in Yemen and has reportedly sent around 850 troops to Yemen in support.¹⁸

Following the attack on the Saudi Embassy in January 2016, the Sudan decided to break off diplomatic relations with Iran, a move clearly signaling a shift in the Sudan's allegiance.

Iran and Eritrea

Revolutionary religious Iran and nationalistic Eritrea were rather unlikely partners as after 9/11, Eritrea had been one of the first to support the US-led GWOT.¹⁹ Up to 2006, Eritrea had voiced concerns about Iran's nuclear ambitions and its attempts to spread its political and religious ideals in the region, with its leaders agreeing that 'a relationship would not be to the advantage of Eritrea politically, strategically or ideologically'.²⁰

But Eritrea's history of bilateral relations is an excellent example of the pragmatism with which states in the Horn of Africa tend to regard external powers.²¹ When the US-Eritrean relationship turned sour and UN sanctions were placed on Eritrea due to its subversive actions in Somalia and other neighboring countries, as per UNSC Resolution 1907 (2009), Asmara's interest in Iran grew.²²

Tehran appointed a Khartoum-based, non-resident ambassador to Eritrea in 2007 and in March 2008, an Eritrean non-resident ambassador started operating from Qatar. Direct diplomatic relations were judged undesirable because of Eritrea's close relationship with Israel. Several high-level visits between Iran and Eritrea took place in this period and under the pretext of fighting piracy, Iran was allowed to use the port of Assab to station war ships in the Gulf of Aden, allowing Iran a strategic position vis-a-vis Israel and Saudi as well as smuggling routes over land and sea, which reportedly benefited militant groups such as Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen.²³

American diplomats commenting on Iran-Eritrean relations concluded that the greatest 'shared commonality' seemed to be an anti-US stance.²⁴ In the same vein, Eritrea was ostensibly trying to build relations with Syria, Cuba and Venezuela and wanted to heal its relations with Libya and the Sudan. As a consequence of Asmara's flirtations with Tehran, Israel, which had long held cordial relations with Eritrea, experienced a deterioration of its ties with Eritrea.²⁵

Recently, cracks have appeared in Eritrea's international isolation. The EU, driven by the large

numbers of young Eritreans migrating to Europe, is seeking to re-engage the government in Asmara.²⁶ In June 2016, for the first time in a decade, a UN ship docked in Eritrea to facilitate an aid shipping to South Sudan.²⁷ As other donors reengage with Eritrea, the relations between Iran and Eritrea weaken.

Arab Gulf States have also stepped up engagement with the country. The UAE in particular has recently built positive relations with Eritrea and was reportedly allowed to construct a modern airbase with new air traffic control towers and hangars, a deep-water port and a training facility.²⁸ The UAE is also reported to have committed to modernize Asmara International Airport and increase fuel supplies to Eritrea.²⁹

Iran and Somalia

The internationally Federal Government of Somalia has ostensibly stayed clear from engaging closely with Iran, not least in order not to upset its main aid donors, which are found in the West and in Turkey.³⁰ Iran, as documented in a 2006 UN investigation, instead provided support to the Islamic Courts Union and insurgent groups operating in Somalia. The support included ammunition, medical supplies and doctors, thereby violating UNSC Resolution 733 (1992) which placed an arms embargo on Somalia.³¹

However, in recent years Iran has tried harder to build up ties with the Somali government. An Iranian Embassy was established in war-torn Somalia in 2012, not least to mirror moves by its rival Turkey in the country. Iran also started to provide humanitarian aid through the Iman Khomeini Foundation and the Iranian Red Crescent Society, which provided relief in times of famine and reportedly led Quranic schools.³²

Despite the efforts, Somali-Iranian relations never really took off and in January 2016, the Iranian Embassy was ordered to close. Instead, Somalia was eager to invest in relations with the Arab Gulf states. In May 2016, DP World (a Dubai company) won a 30-year contract to manage and expand the port of Berbera in Somaliland. The UAE has also helped expand port facilities in Bassoso in Puntland and brokered a local peace agreement in a border dispute between Puntland and the Galmudug State in Somalia.³³ As a side-effect, these facilities and activities have helped check Iranian influence in the Horn.

Iran and Djibouti

Despite the fact that Iran and Djibouti do not have diplomatic representations in each other's countries, until recently, the relations have been generally good. Djibouti, as a small state, has a strategic objective of keeping good relations with as many external powers as possible. This is reflected in the fact that Djibouti is hosting a good number of foreign militaries on its soil, sometimes of rivaling powers.³⁴

Under Ahmadinejad's presidency, several visits took place involving Djibouti high officials. The Iranian president himself visited Djibouti in 2009 (for six hours), *en route* to Kenya and the Comoros. Ahmadinejad was welcomed at the DP World-managed port and the visit yielded five economic agreements. Iran also financed the construction of the country's new National Assembly building, a project worth an estimated US\$20 million. The US embassy did not flag Ahmadinejad's visit as of importance, adding that 'Djibouti is a master at maintaining good relations with nearly all comers', as can be read in a leaked State Department cable.³⁵

As did the Sudan and Somalia, Djibouti broke off diplomatic relations following the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran in January 2016, which was sparked by the Saudi execution of Shi'ite Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. Saudi Arabia is Djibouti's second import partner and is expected to open a base in Djibouti in 2017, with one of the assumed objectives being to deter Iranian naval forces from patrolling waters in the region.³⁶

Iran and Ethiopia

Ethiopia, a majority Christian country, is arguably least open to Iranian influence and Iran and Ethiopia have always had a problematic relationship. Ethiopia opened an embassy in Tehran in 1991, but closed it again in 1995 as Iran (through the Sudan) was linked to the failed assassination attempt on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during his visit to Addis Ababa.³⁷ Iran nonetheless was allowed to keep its diplomatic mission in Ethiopia open.

At the moment, Ethiopia is becoming an increasingly dominant player in the region, with strong economic growth and future potential as an electricity exporter. Diplomatically, it hosts the African Union and plays an active role in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). In his farewell speech in December 2016, the outgoing Iranian Ambassador recognized that the size and numbers of Iranian investments in Ethiopia were small, urging Iran to build stronger ties with a growing Ethiopia.³⁸

Iran's ambitions at sea

Indirectly related the Iran's ambitions in the Horn of Africa are its ambitions to become a significant naval power that would help Tehran increase influence not only in the Arabian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, but also in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. In this respect, Iran has recently started voicing its ambition to pursue the establishment of naval bases beyond its border. An Iranian state-run newspaper stated that naval bases could be 'ten times more efficient than nuclear power' in Iran's quest to be a player of significance.³⁹

In February 2010, Iran launched its first domestically manufactured war ship and has repeatedly used this achievement to show it is serious about its efforts.⁴⁰ The topic resurfaced to the media headlines again when in November 2016, soon after the election of Donald Trump for US president, the Iranian General Mohammad Hussein Bagheri was quoted as mentioning Syria and Yemen as potential options for new naval bases.⁴¹ In December 2016, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani reportedly directed the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) to start the development of nuclear marine propulsion technology to be used for purposes of maritime transport.⁴²

Despite small gains, so far, Iran's naval ambitions seem mostly political posturing for audiences at home and a way to stay defiant in light of the Trump election, given the concerns the new US President has expressed about the Iranian nuclear deal.

Assessing Iran's Volatile Attractiveness

Iran, in the bigger picture of external involvement in the Horn of Africa, has not much constructive to offer to national state authorities. Its biggest 'clients' tend to be states that have found themselves in positions of international isolation or states that flirt with Iran as part of a negotiation strategy with other external powers, the US and the Gulf states in particular. Beyond legitimate state authorities, subversive groups rallying under the banner of radical Islam and looking for military support through clandestine channels have also found a supplier in Iran. But in the Horn of Africa, those groups are mainly Sunni and given growing sectarian sentiments, cooperation with Shi'ite Iran has its ideological limitations.

An ideological mismatch

An important barrier to Iranian expansion in the Horn of Africa is ideological, which has created animosity particularly at the level of society. On the surface, Iran's anti-Western sentiments and extremist religious messages tend to resonate with impoverished societies that lived through difficult post-colonial transitions and suffer from high levels of corruption. But recent years have brought the Sunni-Shi'ite divide more to the forefront and increasingly, local political and religious authorities in the Horn of Africa are wary about Iran's desire to promote Shi'ite Islam in their predominantly Sunni and Sufi societies.

Even with the Sudan, this proselytizing tendency led to resentment and ultimately a deterioration of the bilateral relations. Initially, the mutual interest of political Islam as a governance model attracted Omar al-Bashir's Sudan to Tehran. But in the mid-2000s, the

Sudanese Islamic Fiqh Board, close to the President, started warning for 'Shi'ification' and in 2006, it accused the three Iranian Cultural Centers present in Sudan of spreading the Shia narrative of Islam.⁴³ In 2014, Khartoum ordered the centers closed and deported the centers' staff and the Iranian cultural attaché.⁴⁴

Active countermeasures by external powers

Arguably the largest obstacle for Iran to gain a solid foothold in the Horn of Africa are the countermeasures by other external actors. Throughout history, Iran has accumulated many powerful opponents that are willing to incur costs to actively counter what they see as attempts to spread Iranian influence in Africa or the Middle East. With varying intensities, Israel, the US and several Gulf states have effectively countered Iranian attempts to increase its influence. As Iran and the national government in the Horn of Africa have experienced, such countermeasures can take various forms. The three most common strategies that can be found include:

- **Support for regional opponents:** Given the many intrastate and interstate conflicts in the region, the game of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' is easily played. For example, in the times that the Sudan was close with Iran, Egypt, Israel and several Gulf States backed Eritrea in Asmara's dispute with the Sudan. Also, when militants in Somalia received aid from Iran, Israel provided Ethiopia with military aid to fight those same militants.
- **Punishment or deterrence:** Given the fact that the local governments are dependent on external powers, more powerful actors can use coercion to keep them from dealing with Iran. For example, partly because of its dealings with Iran, the US placed the Sudan on the list of states sponsoring terrorism. One of the conditions to be delisted was the expulsion of the Iranian Ambassador.⁴⁵ Also, the US told Djibouti in 2008 that increased cooperation with Iran on matters of defence would impact relations with Washington.⁴⁶ And when Eritrea developed closer relations with Iran and started using the facilities in Assab, the US expanded an anti-piracy mission to include Iranian arms shipments.
- **Offering a more attractive package:** Given the often pragmatic way in which the Horn of Africa states tend to operate, authorities tend to be receptive to switching sides for increased benefits. For example, Somalia opted for the US aid package during the Cold War. And Khartoum's turn away from Iran was partly based on its desire to prevent economic

collapse with a financial injection from the Gulf. And with the long-term leasing of the port of Assab, Eritrea has secured a financial lifeline that can help it ease its international isolation. Moreover, China and Russia substitute for Iran as major trading and arms-supply partners of the Sudan as they provide the largest amount of military equipment and arms sales.⁴⁷

Conclusion

The Horn of Africa is a place in which diplomatic relationships tend to be volatile and hardly ever exclusive. External actors and local governments often have different ideas about what the relationship brings and as a result, they tend to be based on uncomfortable interdependence. The relative weakness of some states enables external powers to significantly impact local security dynamics, while at the same time, governments in the Horn can skillfully exploit existing rivalries between external powers.

The barriers for external powers to influence the security dimension in the region are low, due the many localized and regional conflicts (both political, ethnic and religious) as well as the economic challenges of the region's national governments. While accurate and full information on the actual scope of support for state and non-state actors is not readily available, it seems that in the past years, external interest in the Horn of Africa has grown again.

The reasons lie in the increased threat of extremism and terrorism, the conflicts in the Middle East and the war in Yemen. Once again global powers such as the US, Europe, Russia and China are influencing regional dynamics. However this time, given the transregional nature of the current threats, regional players seem to play a more pronounced role in the Horn of Africa and have actively tried to increase their own influence or counter the influence of a rival.

The regional external actors most visible in the Horn at this point in time are Turkey, Israel, Iran and several Gulf States. Within this pool, Iran seems currently the least successful. In the past decades Iran might have been seen as attractive as an alternative source of finance and resources for isolated states and non-state actors, while Iran's anti-Western rhetoric was also welcomed in the post-colonial Horn. At the moment however, Iran seems increasingly regarded as a sectarian spoiler, while the governments of the Horn are often looking elsewhere for financial support.

Endnotes

- 1) It is useful to mention that on this particular topic a large body of unverifiable and unreliable online news reports seems to exist.
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