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SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: A THEATER FOR MIDDLE EAST POWER STRUGGLES

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Africa has experienced an unprecedented level of involvement in its regional affairs by Middle Eastern states in the past few years.¹ This is a remarkable development, indeed, given that transregional relations have been characterized by reciprocal ignorance for most of the post-World War II period.

The scope of these current transregional entanglements can be best observed along the African coast bordering the Red Sea. Middle Eastern states have facilitated peace talks in, for instance, Sudan (Qatar, 2008-2011), and Somalia (Saudi Arabia, 2007; Turkey, since 2011), as well as between Djibouti and Eritrea (Qatar, 2010-2017).² More recently, concerted mediation efforts by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia have led to an agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia — ending, finally, their 20-year war in September 2018 — and stimulated fresh negotiations between Djibouti and Eritrea. New talks have also been facilitated regarding the three-way conflict among Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan over sharing the Nile waters.³

However, recent Middle Eastern spats

have also left the Horn of Africa facing security-related repercussions. The intra-Gulf crisis pitting Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Qatar and Turkey has reverberated to such an extent that the African Union discussed the spillover in January 2018.⁴ And while the recent diplomatic breakthrough between Eritrea and Ethiopia has been widely praised as an important step toward regional stabilization, observers also caution that Middle Eastern geopolitical rivalries could “provoke destabilizing reactions across the Horn of Africa.”⁵

This is even more true as the Red Sea has experienced notable militarization of late.⁶ Besides the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which have already established military bases in the region or are planning to do so, Middle Eastern states are also emerging as regional military players. Egypt, Iran, Israel and Qatar obviously have a stake in these developments, while Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UAE, which seem bent on becoming key actors in the Greater Horn, are constructing a series of military bases from Sudan to Somalia.

The debates about the militarization

of the Red Sea obscure, however, the fact that Africa as a whole has become a region of vital interest to these and other Middle Eastern states, each of them with its own history of relations there. While prospective economic benefits and international prestige have long dominated the agenda, present-day dynamics are heavily driven by the struggle for hegemony in the Middle East.

This article focuses on the policies of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the dominant regional powers at the center of the hegemonic competition.⁷ On the one hand, their turn to Africa indicates that their foreign policies have become more assertive on the international stage, especially regarding South-South relations. On the other, their current strategic approaches and their politics of alliance building follow very closely the logic of conflict dynamics in their home region.

EVOLUTION OF RELATIONS

Although Ankara, Riyadh and Tehran stress the historic and cultural depth of their centuries-old relations with Africa, the forging of diplomatic ties with post-colonial African states is a relatively new phenomenon.

Post-revolutionary Iran

Iran first reached out to the continent's decolonizing states in the 1950s. Under Pahlavi rule, its Africa policy mainly sought to contain communism by supporting the economies of "moderate" states such as Ethiopia, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan and Zaire. By 1976, on the eve of the Islamic Revolution, it had established bilateral relations with 31 African states.⁸ The emergence of the Islamic Republic altered the approach to these states, increasing their importance to Tehran in many ways.

After the revolution in 1979, Iran was diplomatically isolated across large parts of the globe, including the Middle East.⁹ Africa provided an opportunity to politically and economically break this isolation. With international sanctions imposed on Tehran, the continent gained in importance as a market for exports, particularly crude oil, and provided access to raw materials. Poverty in large parts of the African continent, in turn, opened the door to Iranian influence in many states — especially in the Sahel — despite Tehran's limited means.¹⁰ Besides direct military and financial aid, development assistance distributed via Construction Jihad (*Jahad-e Sazandegi*), an organization created in the wake of the revolution and later merged with the Ministry of Agriculture, was a major tool for gaining a foothold.¹¹ Another was missionary activities, often conducted via Iranian-financed cultural centers or schools, both in countries with significant Shiite minorities such as Ghana and Nigeria, as well as those with Sunni majorities like Mali or Senegal.¹²

Altogether, the Islamic Republic's involvement in Africa has fluctuated in scope and intensity over time, depending on the international pressure on Tehran as well as the foreign-policy orientation of its leadership.¹³ It was strongest under President Ahmadinejad (2005–13), when, due to the conflict over its nuclear program, Tehran was in need of international partners. It sought them in the Côte d'Ivoire, Lesotho, Mauritania, Namibia and South Africa — a nonpermanent member of the United Nations Security Council from 2007 to 2008.¹⁴ States with notable uranium deposits, like Malawi, Niger, Sierra Leone, Togo and Uganda, became focal points under Ahmadinejad's tenure¹⁵ — as did "rogue states" such as Eritrea and Sudan, mostly

for reasons of their geostrategic location.¹⁶

During President Rouhani's first term (2013-17), Iran's engagement in Africa abated. With the international nuclear deal in the offing, the continent's political and economic importance to Iran decreased considerably. Iranian trade figures can be seen as a clear indication of this. Paradoxically, this is about the same time that Saudi Arabia began to rediscover its strategic interest in Africa after a prolonged period of neglect.

Saudi Arabia

The beginnings of Saudi Arabia's Africa policy date back to King Faisal (1964-75), who is credited with having established the bulk of the country's diplomatic relations with African states after the Six-Day War of 1967 in an effort to isolate Israel. Faysal is thus deemed responsible for the first

coherent policy toward the continent, one that was abandoned, however, soon after his death.¹⁷ This is not to say that Riyadh was ever completely absent from the continent thereafter. The kingdom has always sought to secure its vital interests in its immediate neighborhood, the (Greater) Horn of Africa — especially Somalia. In the latter, it backed up the United States in containing the Soviet Union during the Cold War and, later on, attempted to bring about agreements between warring factions in the new millennium.¹⁸

Apart from being export markets for crude oil and hydrocarbon products, food security was another reason some African states remained on the Saudi agenda.¹⁹ When prices for staple foods doubled on

the world market in 2007, the kingdom — via the Agricultural Development Fund — launched the King Abdallah Initiative for Saudi Agricultural Investments Abroad, providing subsidies to Saudi companies prepared to invest in foreign farmland. By then, Saudi agricultural investments had already flowed into Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda.²⁰

Africa has been affected by Wahhabi proselytizing. Yet, compared to other regions, African states have only recently been at the center of Saudi attention.

Although Riyadh has invested large sums in building educational infrastructure in, for instance, West Africa as well as in the training of African scholars in the kingdom, the Saudi factor is just one among

many responsible for the surge in local jihadism.²¹ Given that proselytization, as well as the

direct support of Islamist groups abroad, is often seen as a major Saudi foreign-policy tool, such comparatively limited efforts suggest that Africa was far from a top priority for Riyadh.

Saudi Arabia rediscovered its strategic interest in Africa in the wake of the Arab uprisings in 2011, chiefly for fear of Iranian encroachment into the continent. Even before this time, Saudi embassies in Africa had warned Riyadh of the increased proselytizing activities by local Iranian cultural centers and demanded their own government's political responses.²² Yet it took some years for Riyadh to funnel commensurate resources to back up its new strategic interest. Still, in 2013, a report by the General Department for African

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States at the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs lamented that Saudi embassies in Africa were ill-equipped to counter Iranian moves, let alone China's advances toward Africa.²³ In fact, Saudi Arabia's new focus on Africa only became visible in 2015. It thus coincides with the coming to power of Mohammad bin Salman, the crown prince and de facto leader of the kingdom, and with the beginning of the war in Yemen.

The Saudi-led military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen, whom the kingdom considers to be Iranian proxies, drastically altered the geostrategic importance of the Horn of Africa in the eyes of Riyadh²⁴ — and of Abu Dhabi, Riyadh's main Gulf ally and crucial partner in this war. Although the UAE has become one of the most active external players on the African continent in its own right,²⁵ with major economic stakes there, it appears that Abu Dhabi has so far been closely coordinating its policies with Riyadh.²⁶ Because Saudi Arabia and the UAE are ultimately pursuing their own interests in Africa, it is fair to assume that conflict dynamics in the Middle East — and the war in Yemen in particular — have facilitated the building of common ground, especially on the Red Sea's African shores.

In the past five years, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have invested great effort in upending Iran's relations with Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia. These efforts had largely been successful at first, as most of the abovementioned states loosened their ties with Tehran, making it more difficult, for instance, for Iranian vessels to navigate the Red Sea.²⁷ Also, the UAE now runs military bases in Eritrea (Assab) and Somaliland (Berbera), while Saudi Arabia is about to open its first one in Djibouti.²⁸ Yet the conflict constellations in the Red Sea are complex and rapidly shift. The

recent diplomatic tensions between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi on the one hand, and Djibouti, Sudan and Somalia on the other, have opened up space for their Middle Eastern competitors to regain influence in the Horn, including Turkey.²⁹

Turkey

Turkey has been struggling to extend its clout in the regions adjacent to the Middle East for the past two decades.³⁰ While its initial interest in Africa can be traced back to the coalition government of Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit (1999–2002), Turkish relations with African states intensified with the coming to power of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan — who in 2005 launched his country's official “Opening to Africa” policy.³¹ Though a relative newcomer, Ankara would rapidly gain on Riyadh and Tehran — today self-confidently presenting in government fact sheets the fruits of its labors.³²

The figures are certainly telling. The number of Turkish embassies in Africa, for instance, rose from 12 in 2009 to 40 in 2018. Its bilateral trade volume with African countries reached \$18.8 billion in 2017, a threefold increase since 2003. Turkish investments are estimated to have surpassed \$6 billion by early 2018. The ruling AKP government also stresses the rising numbers in its official development assistance (ODA) to African countries and the fact that Erdoğan, who has visited 23 African states some 39 times, is “the leader who visited Africa the most in the world.”³³

Notwithstanding the Turkish media's proclivity to depict Erdoğan as Africa's best friend,³⁴ Turkey's policy toward the continent is not, in fact, altruistic. Ankara's Africa policy in the new millennium has

been mainly motivated by the prospects of economic gains and political visibility in international affairs.³⁵ Such strategic concerns seem to have become even more pressing in the last few years. Africa's economic potential surely remains a driving force of its Opening to Africa policy, but it is not the sole explanation for Ankara's advances. In fact, Turkish exports to sub-Saharan states have been stagnating, whereas investments chiefly concentrate on North Africa. While Erdoğan's latest visits to Africa³⁶ may thus have aimed to stimulate the Turkish economy,³⁷ they also served to strengthen political relations with new allies after Turkey's falling out with the European Union and the escalation of Middle Eastern power struggles.³⁸ In addition, the upgrading of diplomatic relations with sub-Saharan African countries — home to 15.5 percent of the world's Muslim population³⁹ — is also supposed to undergird Ankara's claim to global Islamic leadership,⁴⁰ something that is heavily contested by Riyadh.

POWER STRUGGLES ABROAD

We thus have a mixture of reasons accounting for past periods of Iranian, Saudi and Turkish engagement with — or disengagement from — Africa. Besides proselytization, which has been chiefly conducted by Riyadh and Tehran and seems to have been a means rather than an end,⁴¹ African states have often been seen as a recruitment pool for international allies. Moreover, economic motives have dominated the Iranian and Turkish agendas, as well as that of Saudi Arabia, whose exports to sub-Saharan states by far eclipse those of Iran and Turkey. Yet, in view of their figures for sub-Saharan states as a percentage of total trade, it is hard to see how economic reasons alone can explain the latest stepped-

up efforts. This holds especially true for Saudi Arabia, as its oil-based economy is hardly complementary with those of many African states, whose own companies are also based on natural resources — often, hydrocarbons.⁴²

Arguably, it seems clear in the Saudi case that Riyadh's hegemonic ambitions in the Middle East are the main driver of its current foreign policy vis-à-vis Africa. It is mainly bent on containing its regional competitors, as well as using the continent's resources to further its claims to leadership in the Middle East. But Riyadh's latest moves have, in turn, provoked strategic reactions by Ankara and Tehran. As a consequence, Africa is increasingly becoming a theater of Middle Eastern conflict.

Scholars of international relations have long ignored the meaning of regions for world politics; they have quite often been seen as just another stage for great-power competition. Still, there are few approaches accounting for the interests of systemic actors, including non-great powers, in a given region. Pursuant to one prominent rationale, extra-regional actors develop their interests in a region in accordance with how they strengthen their positions, both internationally and in their home region. Put differently, a region gains — or loses — in importance to external actors depending on its intrinsic, extrinsic and negative value.⁴³

The Africa policy of Saudi Arabia fits into this logic in multiple ways. First, official narratives regularly portray Africa as a region with negative value due to its importance to Riyadh's adversaries. As noted, Africa only resurfaced on the Saudi agenda after Riyadh had fully realized the continent's strategic meaning for Ankara and Tehran.⁴⁴ In 2012, for instance, a

Saudi diplomat applauded Riyadh's turn to Africa, arguing that "as a result of our big absence we will lose the competition with other states if we miss the chance to powerfully penetrate Africa — which would only mean a natural geopolitical expansion to us."⁴⁵ Appraising Riyadh's Africa policy, the newly appointed minister for African affairs, Ahmad Qattan, recently stated, "We are now on the right track — the more so as we have not adapted ourselves to the African continent in past decades as was required, providing an opportunity to others, some of which have caused trouble."⁴⁶

Second, today more than ever, Riyadh considers Africa as a region of intrinsic value owing to its vital resources.⁴⁷ Elaborating on

the reasons for Riyadh's new comprehensive approach, which will be geared toward all African

states, Qattan placed emphasis on the continent's potential to enrich the Saudi economy.⁴⁸ But Africa's resources are certainly not limited in effect to economic gain. Riyadh relies, for instance, on Sudanese and Somali forces in its military campaign in Yemen and, in concert with Abu Dhabi, has recently begun to negotiate with Kampala regarding the deployment of Ugandan soldiers there.⁴⁹ Furthermore, African states are supposed to back the Saudi position in diplomatic disputes;⁵⁰ to be a source of prestige by joining the ranks of the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT) or attending the Arab Islamic American Summit during Donald Trump's visit to the kingdom in May 2017, thereby supporting Riyadh's

claim to leadership in the Muslim world.⁵¹

Third, Riyadh has come to view Africa as a region of extrinsic value. It is considered to have auxiliary potential for the defense of the homeland or for an offensive against competitors, including Turkey but most notably Iran.⁵² This strategic view is not restricted to the Red Sea region either. Saudi Arabia recently financially supported the Sahel Joint Military Force, an offshoot of the G5-mandated coalition to combat terrorism, organized crime and human trafficking in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad.⁵³ While also supported by the EU, Saudi backing for this G5 undertaking is widely seen as another indication of Riyadh's determination to combat

Iran.⁵⁴ The same applies, for instance, in Nigeria, where Riyadh has been trying to weaken the Islamic Movement

In May 2017, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif announced that, apart from safeguarding its economic and political interests, Tehran was determined also to establish stability and security in Africa.

funded by Tehran;⁵⁵ in Senegal, where the kingdom has increased its funding for mosques run by Salafis to counter the influence of Iranian-financed educational institutions;⁵⁶ and in South Africa, where Riyadh — as in Nigeria and Senegal — has invested heavily in the country's economy to disrupt South African-Iranian relations.⁵⁷

Yet Riyadh's heightened engagement is provoking a stepping-up of Turkish and Iranian activities in return. The opening of a Turkish military base in Somalia, as well as Ankara's leasing of Sudan's Suakin Island in the Red Sea in late 2017, may, for instance, be interpreted as a response to Saudi and Emirati moves.⁵⁸ These steps, however, are considered to further com-

promise Arab security interests in what has been labeled “the Arabian lake” by some commentators.⁵⁹ This is even more so the case as Ankara has begun to coordinate its policies in the Red Sea with Qatar, still under the economic and political boycott by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and Bahrain that began with the Gulf diplomatic row of 2017.

Iran, too, has again boosted its activities in Africa during Rouhani’s second term (2017–present).⁶⁰ Shortly after his reelection in May 2017, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif announced that, apart from safeguarding its cultural, economic and political interests, Tehran was determined also to establish stability and security in Africa.⁶¹ This can be read as a clear reference to recent Saudi engagement there. In any case, the number of high-level Iranian officials visiting African states, including Rouhani himself, has increased notably ever since. Iran’s refocusing on Africa has been further spurred by the *de facto* termination of the nuclear deal by the Trump administration and Tehran’s subsequent need to restrengthen its economy. Given these two developments, Africa’s strategic meaning to Tehran has become of “paramount significance,” according to Zarif.⁶²

OUTLOOK

The rapid deepening of transregional relations can be seen as a mixed blessing for Africa. The 2018 hallmark agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, fostered by the prospect of massive investments from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, illustrates the roles that Middle Eastern states can play in promoting peace — and, potentially, in spurring regional integration on their neighboring continent. That said, as long as it is geopolitical competition that dic-

tates the agenda of Middle Eastern powers, the chances for genuine African peace and security look slim.

This reality has already arisen in a number of instances, in fact. On the Djibouti-Eritrea border, Riyadh’s diplomatic row with Qatar threatened to revive the armed conflict between Asmara and Djibouti, when in 2017 Qatari peacekeepers pulled out of the buffer zone without notice after both countries sided with Riyadh.⁶³ In Somalia, the Middle Eastern regional powers’ competition for influence further unsettles the integrity of the federal state, increasing the likelihood of resurgent large-scale conflict.⁶⁴ In Nigeria, the Saudi-Iranian conflict has contributed to a fueling of violent clashes between the Saudi-backed Izala movement and the Iranian-backed Islamic Movement.⁶⁵

These and other incidents have justifiably raised fears that Africa is about to become a new theater for Middle Eastern conflicts,⁶⁶ and the latest developments do indeed suggest that gaining influence at each other’s expense is the primary objective for Ankara, Riyadh and Tehran alike. Take, for instance, the Saudi-led initiative to establish the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. First discussed by representatives of Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen during meetings in Cairo and Riyadh in 2017 and 2018, the entity was founded in January 2020 and announced as a way to foster cooperation among its members and to enhance security, stability, trade and investment in the region.⁶⁷ In December 2018, when the formal creation of the Council was still in limbo,⁶⁸ then-Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs Adel Al-Jubeir stressed that it was “part of the Kingdom’s efforts to protect its interests” — aiming

to lessen “outside influence ... on this region.”⁶⁹ That “outside influence” meant Iran and Turkey was duly understood by media outlets in the Arab Gulf states, as well in Iran and Turkey themselves.⁷⁰

Despite official avowals in Ankara, Riyadh and Tehran of Africa’s strategic meaning, it is unclear how the Middle Eastern competition unfolding there will actually shape up in the near future, being heavily contingent on developments beyond African shores. Compared to past periods, Iran’s reach in Africa is currently limited due to both Tehran’s deliberate intermittent neglect of the continent during Rouhani’s first term and successful Saudi and Emirati containment efforts. The Trump administration’s pullout from the nuclear deal and the latest heightened saber-rattling between Washington and Tehran have underlined Africa’s importance to Iran and, with economic sanctions again in place, seriously complicated its Africa policy. In a way, the same holds true for Ankara, which is currently facing a massive budget deficit as a consequence of Turkey’s severe economic decline. While Iran’s foreign-policy apparatus has become accustomed to working with limited resources over the past few decades, it remains to be seen how Turkey’s foreign policy will adapt to its own financial restrictions. Notwithstanding its alliance with Qatar, which might be willing to cover some of Ankara’s expenses in one

way or another, Turkey’s Africa policy can be expected to lose impetus sooner rather than later.

All this seems to play into the hands of Riyadh, which is far from facing comparable constraints in its African affairs and which has a potent ally at hand, both in terms of resources and strategic planning. For the time being, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh have a number of strategic goals in common. Above all, they share a marked enmity toward Iran, Turkey and Qatar. Yet whether or not this will make for a stable partnership and contribute to a sustainable, coordinated Africa policy is questionable. Regardless of the unsteady nature of personalistic foreign-policy decision making, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have strategic differences with regard to the war in Yemen — and, even more acutely, the future of that country.⁷¹ Although the war itself is unlikely to end anytime soon, the future of a coordinated Saudi-Emirati Africa policy in many respects hinges on the extent to which Riyadh and Abu Dhabi will be able to settle their differences on the Arab side of the Bab al-Mandab strait. This bears some irony, but it is also logically coherent. It was the Yemen war that gave rise to heightened Saudi-Emirati coordination efforts in Africa in the first place. Yet, however unlikely, as of now, any ruptures in Saudi-Emirati relations — let alone serious ones — would undoubtedly unleash new dynamics in the power struggle for Africa.

¹ In the following I focus on sub-Saharan Africa, which is here understood as the community of all African states minus Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, and Tunisia. These North African Arab states share a long history with the Middle East and can indeed be considered as core members of the Middle Eastern regional system. For the sake of readability, the adjective “sub-Saharan” is usually omitted.

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⁶ Shehab al-Makahleh and Giorgio Cafiero, "The Militarization of the Red Sea," *LobeLog*, January 10, 2018, <https://lobelog.com/the-militarization-of-the-red-sea/>.

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- ²⁴ Asteris Huliaras and Sophia Kalantzakos, “The Gulf States and the Horn of Africa: A New Hinterland?,” *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 4 (2017): 63-73, 66.
- ²⁵ See, for instance, International Crisis Group, *The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa* (Abu Dhabi/Washington, DC/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2018), Crisis Group Middle East Briefing 65.
- ²⁶ Besides the recent concerted mediation activities in several Horn of Africa states, Saudi-Emirati cooperation is best captured in their joint efforts to establish — and run — military bases. It has been stated, for instance, that “the military bases, airports and sea terminals owned by Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the eastern coast of the Horn of Africa [...] are considered partial military forces, but they all perform in a unified manner.” Haifa Ahmed Al Maashi, “From Security Governance to Geopolitical Rivalry: Iran-GCC Confrontation in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean,” *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 11, no. 4 (2017): 46–63, 54. Concerning the Emirati military base in Assab, Eritrea, a recent report by the International Crisis Group holds that “Riyadh signed a security agreement [...] to use Assab, leaving Abu Dhabi to carry out the deal’s terms.” International Crisis Group, *The United Arab Emirates*, 5. In October 2018, Riyadh reportedly intervened with Mogadishu, admonishing Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khayre not to obstruct Emirati investments in Somaliland and, by extension, Berbera—which hosts another Emirati military base. “DP World in Negotiations with Djibouti and Hargeisa,” *The Indian Ocean Newsletter*, October 26, 2018, no. 1484, 7.
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