



Strategy Notebook 237-B

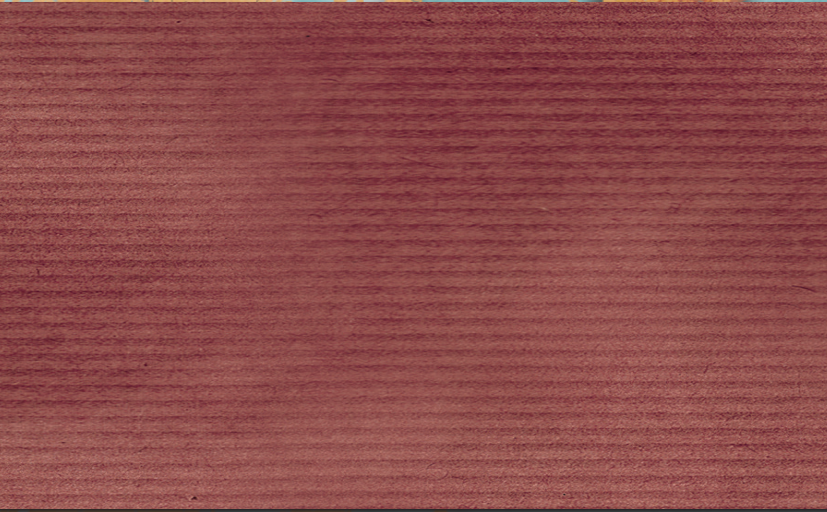
**The Horn of Africa, the new
centre of the African world**

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Introduction

A window onto the future

Xavier Aldekoa

Djibouti and Somalia: a landscape of grey and brown, parched by drought. In 2011, the region was suffering one of the worst droughts in decades and I, a determined but inexperienced twenty-nine-year-old journalist, had set out to travel through every country in the Horn of Africa—Ethiopia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia/Somaliland—to report on the famine that had been unleashed by that parched sky. That day, as I made my way along a stony path towards the place where thousands of Somali refugees had arrived, fleeing the growling of their stomachs and the jihadist violence of Al-Shabaab, I was struck by the beauty and the poetry. There is probably no more beautiful refugee camp in the Horn of Africa than Ali Addeh. Nestled between mountains, in the middle of a wide valley, the sight of hundreds of white tents evoked a base camp in the Himalayas, though without a trace of snow on the horizon and with the peaks not posing a challenge to climb, but rather walls shielding against fear.

We had to wait until dusk to hear the verses. When the sun went down and fires were lit in rusty tins to prepare the meagre supper, adults and children alike gathered round the pots to nourish their souls as well. It was an unshakeable custom. Every night, Koraicha Ibrahim, mother of five biological and two adopted children, who had arrived at the camp three months earlier, recited poems and tales about the legends and history of her Somali people. Koraicha made sure her children listened carefully. 'I tell them Somali stories or recite poems from our people so that they are

prepared. When peace comes, they will return,' said Koraicha. For that woman, nostalgia was a matter of survival.

That love for her own culture in a remote camp in Djibouti and that struggle against time to preserve the traditions and dignity of a wounded people made a deep impression on me then, but it was not the only time. In the temples around Lake Tana, in Ethiopia; on the white sands of Mogadishu's beaches, where hundreds of young people gathered at sunset; beneath the rock paintings of Laas Geel in Somaliland, or in the velvet seats of the modernist Roma cinema in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, I have witnessed the pride of the peoples inhabiting the Horn of Africa, a land often reduced to its wounds.

For far too long, the media and analytical gaze has reduced the region to its wars, its famines, its piracy or its failed states. And, although instability exists and weighs heavily, it does not in the slightest explain the richness and complexity of one of the continent's most vital corners, where much of the global balance is at stake. The Horn of Africa, with its nomadic soul, is not an isolated and battered place; it is a crossroads and the meeting point of the African continent, the Middle East and Asia; a gateway to the Mediterranean via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, where ancient routes intersect and the new strategies of the 21st century are woven. It is no coincidence that, today, teams of archaeologists are discovering, in their excavations in the area, hundreds of pottery pieces from the Kingdom of Saba in southern Arabia; delicate porcelain from distant China, or bronze bracelets and rings from India, Yemen or Sudan. For millennia, the Horn of Africa has attracted communities from all over the world and has been, since ancient times, one of the epicentres of global trade and the blending of cultures and ideas.

The Horn of Africa is not merely an invitation to observe the past. It is also a land bearing the deep imprint of its colonial past, yet one that is moving into the future as one of the main arenas of global geopolitics, where both the old powers and the new players destined to rule the world have set their sights in recent years. New times are dawning in the Horn of Africa that will be key to understanding the future: the emergence of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the region—the latter particularly in its ports—and the fierce race among the world's major powers to establish bases along the African coast facing the Red Sea are compounded by current international realities set to create new frameworks, such as the war in Iran or Israel's recognition of Somaliland. Furthermore, in turbulent global times, further unsettled by the collapse of the Strait of Hormuz in early 2026, a vital enclave such as the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb takes on even greater significance, as a decisive proportion of global trade, oil and even the data that underpins the Internet passes through it.

This book, for which I have had the pleasure of coordinating a team of analysts and experts on the region from various countries, seeks to open a window onto this extraordinary corner of Africa in order to understand it from its various angles.

In his chapter on governance, the author describes the web of politics and conflict using a powerful image: power as a mycelium spreading underground. Invisible, interconnected, difficult to define. Thanks to his analysis of the fragmentation of state projects, we understand why formal institutions are not enough to explain what is happening in this African region, where authority is contested beyond official frameworks and where violence finds cracks through which to seep. That same idea runs through his reflection on space: the land is trodden upon, but space is constructed, and in the Horn of Africa that space is the result of centuries of relationships, conflicts and overlaps. It is no coincidence that borders prove insufficient to contain what happens within them.

The chapter on the history of trade routes, for its part, reminds us that, before it was a border, the Horn of Africa was a route. The chapter reconstructs a territory that for centuries functioned as a bridge between continents, from the ports of the ancient Kingdom of Aksum to the networks connecting the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean. The region has not now become a strategic hub; it has always been one.

Perhaps that is why, when we speak of new powers today, we are in fact witnessing a reconfiguration of something ancient: the states of the region are no longer merely arenas of influence, but actors who negotiate, cede or exchange parcels of sovereignty in order to survive. China builds and finances, the Emirates manage flows and ports, Turkey combines defence and culture, whilst the West loses its centrality.

The Horn is also shifting and growing. In the chapter on society and demography, attention is drawn to one of the quietest yet most decisive forces: youth. Over 70% of the population is under thirty. Population growth is already exerting constant pressure on fragile political systems, inadequate labour markets and social structures in flux. This youth can be a driving force or a source of division, an opportunity or a conflict, depending on something as fragile as the capacity of states to offer a future to their inhabitants.

Added to this pressure is another factor that does not appear on maps, yet shapes them: identity. The chapter on culture and language debunks the idea of borders as fixed lines. In the Horn of Africa, communities straddle states, sharing languages, clans and histories. A Somali may live in several different states whilst remaining part of the same network, the same people.

Identities do not coincide with maps, but, often shaped by a nomadic tradition, they retain their richness and vitality across the centuries.

In times of climate crisis and interconnected oceans, the Horn of Africa will tie its future to water like few other regions in the world. The chapter 'Hydrocracy in the Horn' highlights how control over water resources and sea routes is not a technical issue, but a political and existential one. Landlocked Ethiopia depends on its neighbours for its economic lifeline, whilst using its power over the Nile as a regional lever. All around it, ports become coveted assets and the Red Sea, an artery that everyone wants to control.

This book seeks to paint a picture of a region that cannot be understood in parts. Where every element—history, geography, demography, culture, economy and geopolitics—is intertwined with the others and demands a broad perspective to grasp the nuances. The Horn of Africa is, moreover, a mirror holding up a glimpse of the future that lies just around the corner: more fragmented, more competitive, less predictable.

I hope you enjoy reading it. Welcome to discovering the Horn of Africa, the new centre of the African world.

Chapter One

Turbulent governance in the Horn of Africa: the fragmentation of state projects

Daniel Maldonado Rodríguez

Abstract

In the Horn of Africa, the countries are held together by their seams. Tradition has woven together values, religious practices and economic ties to form a single garment that reflects their soul. The porosity of their borders challenges the strength of these bonds, compromising the entire regional and global security complex. Their history, conflicts and solutions cannot be understood in isolation, so it is necessary to latch on. Power, like mycelium, spreads through the region's subsoil, causing deep rifts in its social fabric. The Horn is much more than its conflicts, even though these define it. The region suffers because violence runs rampant, states are weak, and misfortunes are ignored. In this blind world, the seed of violence sprouts because no one looks at it.

Keywords

Horn of Africa, Governance, War, Security, Borders.

1 The memory of the land and the construction of space in the Horn of Africa

The wider Horn of Africa is a region situated in East Africa, comprising Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia, and their neighbours, Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya and Uganda. All of them tread the same land and construct the same space. Space, unlike land, is a social construct that is not simply 'there' as a neutral vessel waiting to be filled; it is a dynamic means of control constructed by human beings and, therefore, of domination and power (Herner, 2009). In the Horn of Africa, states share social and cultural values stemming from a centuries-old tradition of interrelationships, common religious practices and economic ties, and their political destinies have always been closely intertwined with those of their neighbours (Sharamo and Mesfin, 2011).

The history of governance in this region is a struggle for power, and where there is power, there is resistance. The logic of space in the Horn functions 'like a constellation of visible stars revolving around a powerful but invisible black hole, in which the formal politics of borders, sovereign states, institutions and official budgets operate solely within the gravitational field of the informal struggle for power' (De Waal, 2014: 220). Power is not an outcome, but a constant struggle, and the pursuit of it leads straight into a brick wall. Whilst the land is being tilled, space is being contested.

Today, the Horn of Africa is one of the most conflict-ridden and poorly governed corners of the world. The region is witnessing 'interstate and civil wars, conventional and irregular wars waged by jihadists, military interventions and maritime piracy, genocidal massacres and non-violent popular uprisings' (De Waal, 2014: 36). This conflict is as porous as an *injera*¹, as it occurs within borders, or behind bars, that are not strong enough to contain the violence. After all, this is 'a space of anomie that tends to evade whatever limitations and constraints are imposed on its development' (Aznar, 2011: 1).

This interconnected system of crises is self-perpetuating and stems from a failure of effective governance. This region is a Regional Security Complex (RSC) (Buzan, 1983); that is, 'a group of states in which their primary concerns are so interlinked that

¹ A soft, leavened flatbread, a staple of Ethiopian and Eritrean cuisine.

their national security cannot realistically be considered in isolation from one another' (Buzan in Sharamo and Mesfin, 2011: 3). The ongoing conflicts in Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia exert a significant destabilising influence on the immediate regions of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Furthermore, given their strategic position on the Red Sea and their influence on international trade, the consequences are felt far beyond their immediate neighbourhood, impacting the wider world.

2 The history of governance in the Horn of Africa

The land is imbued with the information of history through the roots of time. Its memory is exceptional, as the footsteps that tread upon it and the hands that work it naturally permeate its genetic code. By delving into a land shaped by the civilisations that live and have lived in the Horn, we may uncover the reasons for this entrenched violence in the region. The origins of the instability can be traced back to its unique experience during the colonial era, and in particular to the demarcation of borders and the mismanagement of political transitions towards self-government (Aljambra in Mohamud, 2023). Building on this point, the anthropologist Alex de Waal (2015) employs a framework divided into a prologue and three acts, which encapsulates a bloody history of regional domination.

2.1 The colonial period: a prologue

A map is a mirror of the present onto which its past is projected. The distribution of space is a dialogue, or a reproach, in which its boundaries are under constant discussion. The lines drawn create compartmentalised spaces, territories, which conceal within them the scars of the exercise of power. Their institutionalised edges—that is, the borders—are the scars of history. Borders are dynamic in nature and serve different purposes for those who draw them and for those who live within them (Mohamud, 2023), reflecting on paper the mental pathways of their architects. Cartography is, therefore, a technology of power that creates maps capable of shaping the imagination, as well as the conditions that make governance and domination possible (Gülşah and Dos Reis, 2023: 146-170). The African continent and the Horn of Africa are a prime example of cartographic strangulation.

In 1869, the European and Asian continents were linked by the Suez Canal, bringing the Bab el-Mandeb Strait into the spotlight. From then on, merchant ships could sail directly from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, reducing the distance between Asian and European ports by as much as two-thirds (Mohamud, 2023). This area began to be of great interest to those seeking to line their pockets through these maritime routes. Between 1884 and 1904, the colonial powers drew a radial line to demarcate the borders of a continent where border zones or crossings already existed, functioning as barriers between kingdoms. This new demarcation, which disregarded cultural spaces, completely altered the function of borders, affecting local economies (Okumu in Mohamud, 2023).

On the eve of the colonial period, the region was a mosaic of Christian, Islamic and animist powers. The Abyssinian Empire,

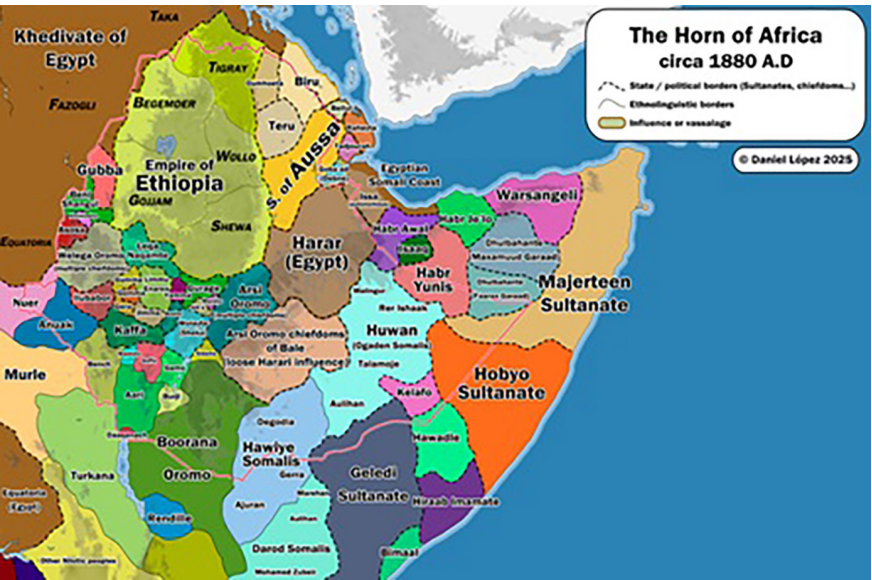


Figure1. Map of the Horn of Africa in 1800. Source: Wikimedia Commons, 2025

now Ethiopia, was the major regional power and, between 1855 and 1898, it undertook a significant process of centralisation of power and political unification, strengthening its centre of gravity. As a result, on 1 March 1896, the Ethiopians defeated the Italian army at the Battle of Adwa, shaking off the colonial threat and securing their share of the spoils in the region.

At the height of the colonial era, the mosaic was reconfigured once more, fragmenting the Somali Peninsula into four pieces: Italy took the largest part, including Mogadishu on the Indian Ocean side; Britain took a piece for its colony in Kenya and formed British Somaliland, opposite Aden; France retained the port of Djibouti and its immediate surroundings, and Ethiopia acquired what came to be known as the Ogaden (De Waal, 2014). This reconfiguration of power shook the political foundations of the region, giving rise to new dynamics of domination.



Figure 2. Map of the Horn of Africa in 1914. Source: author's own, 2026

2.2 The Cold War period: Act One

In 1935, Benito Mussolini's Italian fascist regime, with the support of the *Askari* troops², invaded Ethiopia and temporarily

² The Eritrean Askaris played an indisputable leading role in the establishment of the Italian colonies, from their earliest days in Eritrea through to the consolidation of the

occupied it. Soon, the Ethiopians and British would recapture it in 1941, establishing Haile Selassie I as their new *Negusa Nagast*³. Ethiopia was once again coexisting with colonial neighbours who were already packing their bags to leave. In the 1960s, a wave of independence swept across the Horn as part of a widespread process of African decolonisation, unifying sovereign states fragmented by economic, social and military rifts: Sudan in 1956, Somalia in 1960, Uganda in 1962, Kenya in 1963 and, later, Djibouti in 1977. Somalia was the only country that did not recognise the borders inherited from decolonisation, instantly sparking a pan-Somali irredentist sentiment, forming an alliance with the Soviet Union (USSR) and provoking the Shifta War (1963-1967) with Kenya and, later, the Ogaden War (1977-1978) with Ethiopia (Arconada, 2021).



Figure 3. Map of the Horn of Africa up to 2011. Source author's own, 2026

Italian empire in Africa.

³ It is an Ethiopian imperial title which, translated from Ge'ez, means 'king of kings' and was equivalent to emperor.

These fragile states had inherited weak economies, artificial borders, social conflicts, disorganised armies and incomplete institutions. Their weakness and geostrategic position embroiled them in the Cold War, transforming the Horn into a proxy battlefield between the USSR and the United States (US), blending the logic of blocs with the endemic problems inherited from colonisation. Both contenders demanded ideological loyalty in exchange for large quantities of weaponry, military advisers, aid and training, and even foreign combat forces, driving a dramatic escalation in the intensity of the fighting and the number of casualties (Mohamud, 2023). The regimes in the region were pragmatic and changed sides as readily as the wind changes direction.

As soon as the storm of economic crises blew in during the late 1970s, states shattered into thousands of jagged fragments. International crises significantly reduced public revenues, leaving the states of the Horn of Africa completely destitute. The rulers of these countries shifted their focus to their own short-term survival, clinging to power by deliberately creating divisions within their societies and plundering the assets of their own economies (De Waal, 2014), making it clear that where some see a crisis, others see an opportunity.

By the late 1980s, as the Cold War evaporated, the mechanisms that had regulated political violence disappeared, ushering in the most destructive period in the region's recent history. Violence began to spread, like a rash, throughout its social and political fabric. The ethno-nationalist discourses promoted during this era defined the post-Cold War agenda, giving rise to inter-state wars, border and resource disputes, and failed states (De Waal, 2014). During this period, internal tensions managed by military dictatorships began to accumulate, and it was not long before these escalated into armed conflicts.

2.3 The inter-imperial period: Act Two

Two events in the run-up to this period shaped this bloody episode. Firstly, the withdrawal of the Cold War superpowers and, secondly, the liberalisation of the arms market when Chad, after defeating Libya in 1987, seized large arsenals of weapons and resold them, leading to the spread of low-cost weapons (De Waal, 2014). The withdrawal of former backers and the accessibility of arms opened the door to the political arena for new actors willing to challenge the established order.

In the 1990s, the states of the Horn began to disintegrate. Sudan became an Islamist state, Somalia collapsed structurally and suffered the secession of Somaliland and Puntland, Ethiopia underwent a violent reconfiguration, Djibouti entered a civil war, and Eritrea emerged as an independent nation. This is a period of questioning, firstly, of the nature of the state and, secondly, of its legitimacy and borders.

The Horn of Africa split into two political projects: on the one hand, political Islam, promoted by Sudan, seeking to Islamise the north-eastern region of Africa, and, on the other, the left-wing liberation movements that had seized power following long wars in Uganda, Eritrea and Ethiopia (De Waal, 2014). In 1993, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in Eritrea and Ethiopia respectively and appeared willing to collaborate, alongside Sudan, to stabilise Somalia and usher in a new period of relative peace. However, Sudanese leaders were seeking not only friendly neighbours, but also ideological allies in their export of militant Islam (De Waal, 2014), leading to disagreements that resulted in a regional war between blocs.

In 1994, the left-wing coalition clashed with Sudan, weakening it and generating optimism for regional unification that evaporated when, suddenly, the allies Eritrea and Ethiopia went to war⁴, once again shifting the regional dynamics. The Eritrean leader, Isaias Afwerki, predicted a new Sudan and, buoyed by a sense of invincibility following a series of military victories, deemed it necessary to reaffirm regional dominance (De Waal, 2014) through war. This shift in agenda enabled the continuation of the Sudanese regime, which, from 1999 onwards, was strengthened thanks to oil diplomacy. The 2000 peace process between Eritrea and Ethiopia marked the end of a regional war and the beginning of a relentless period of state reconstruction in the Horn of Africa.

2.4 The era of global rent-seeking: Act Three

With the turn of the century, the distance between countries shrank and global dynamics became more complex. The bipolar world coalesced into a single system, making the US the world's

⁴ The casus belli was a territorial dispute over Badme, a town situated in the disputed border area between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

guiding force. The Horn of Africa, drawn towards this global centre of gravity, underwent a drastic shift in its power dynamics.

During this period, the Horn of Africa attracted the world's attention, mainly due to its geographical position facing the Gulf of Aden, an area of crucial importance for global maritime transport. This interest grew progressively for security reasons. The attacks on the Tanzanian and Kenyan embassies in 1998 and 11 September 2001 led to the opening of a US military base in Djibouti, Camp Lemonnier. Furthermore, from 2007 onwards, piracy off the Somali coast became a critical security issue, compounded by other challenges such as the proliferation of criminal activities including the smuggling of *khat*⁵, coal, weapons and drugs, as well as the fight against human trafficking and illegal fishing (Donelli, 2024). Djibouti gradually became an internationally attractive hub of operations, and a race to establish military bases began. In 2011, in the midst of this race, Sudan split in two and the region was reconfigured once again.



Figure 4 . Political map of the Horn of Africa from 2011 onwards.
Source: author's own, 2026

⁵ Khat is a tree that grows in East Africa and parts of the Arabian Peninsula, and the consumption of its leaves has stimulant effects.

The Horn of Africa, a crossroads between Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East, has transformed from being merely a security hub into a hotly contested geostrategic market. Control of the region is now contested by various regional actors—Ethiopia, Djibouti, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea—and extra-regional actors—Egypt, the United States, China, Russia, the European Union, Japan, Turkey, the Gulf monarchies, Iran, Israel, India. Geopolitical tensions contribute to perpetuating instability stemming from the inability of local and regional leaders to govern effectively.

3 Fractures in the Horn of Africa: state fragility

In the Horn of Africa, power is completely fragmented, reflecting the great weakness of its local governments. This region is among those most affected by state fragility, which manifests itself when the state apparatus lacks sufficient social legitimacy (Fukuyama in Adaye, 2019). Trust between citizens and their government is the centre of gravity from which the strength of any state emanates.

In the Horn, there are more institutions than ever before; yet, there is a perpetual institutional mistrust. When:

‘[...] a state fails to provide the basic services it is required to deliver, when its authority is limited or arbitrary, or when its legitimacy is systematically questioned, the social contract and public trust weaken to the point where citizen discontent turns into violent protest by sectors of society’ (Adaye, 2019).

In this region, abuses such as cronyism, corruption, marginalisation, nepotism, human rights violations, and a lack of commitment to eradicating poverty, deprivation and unemployment are rife (Adaye, 2019), permeating their countries with violence.

Instability is concentric and exponential; in other words, the conflicts that cause it not only generate further conflicts, but also become increasingly severe each time they occur. Stability, by contrast, is a cycle between the basic pillars of the state and, to achieve it, the state apparatus must operate in the right direction: based on a security situation that facilitates good governance and enables socio-economic development and, conversely, directly increases the level of security, thereby influencing the other variables once again (Sánchez, 2015). The interconnection

of conflicts in the Horn of Africa requires an approach aimed at mitigating the structural violence that institutionalises misery; to this end, the region must be viewed as a single economic, political and, above all, security unit.

CICLO DE ESTABILIZACIÓN



Figure 5 . The stabilisation cycle. Source: Sánchez, 2015, and author's own, 2026

4 Regional challenges to governance

Security in an interconnected world must be understood in a tiered manner: first, by addressing regional dynamics and, second, by analysing the specific characteristics of each country. The glue that binds each country in the region, and the reason why the Horn is considered a regional security complex (RSC), is its capacity to export consequences beyond national borders. However, each of these countries harbours within itself a different explanation for its fragility and conflict.

4.1 Ethiopia: the caged giant

The soil of Ethiopia is steeped in historical richness. Lucy, the oldest direct human ancestor ever found—an *Australopithecus afarensis*⁶ dating back 3.2 million years—was discovered in Ethiopia. Since then, the country has been ruled by, amongst

⁶ An extinct hominid species that lived in East Africa (Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya) between 3.9 and 3 million years ago.

others, Aksumite kings, Solomonic emperors, communist leaders, Tigrayan prime ministers and, now, by Abiy Ahmed Ali. Despite its long history, this country is suffering from a severe crisis of national identity.

The recent but forgotten war in Tigray (2020-2022) was a clash between conflicting national and historical projects: the Tigrayan and the Ethiopian. Nationalisms are forged through shared histories, and the longer these histories are perceived to be, the more complex nationalist projects become (Plaut and Vaughan, 2023). The clash between two different conceptions of the state turned into a violent struggle, in which each side sought to impose its own model.

The Solomonic dynasty of Ethiopia began in 1270, when Yekuno Amlak overthrew the last Zagwe king, restoring a lineage which, according to tradition, descended from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Between 1855 and 1896, during the imperial era, Ethiopia was unified, becoming a single political entity. This new nation was a mosaic of identities in cultural, economic, linguistic and religious terms⁷ and, of course, where there is a diversity of opinions and a lack of dialogue, power struggles flourish.

This dynasty lasted seven hundred and four years, until a series of economic crises weakened Emperor Haile Selassie, leading to the triumph of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution, led by the communist military junta, the Derg. Soon, aristocrats loyal to the old empire, ethno-nationalist movements and other left-wing opposition groups united under the umbrella of the FDRPE coalition, standing up to this repressive regime. As soon as its Soviet backing faltered, the regime fell and, in 1995, that coalition led by the FLPT took power, establishing the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

By 2018, following years of political stagnation, the country was engulfed in a climate of intense anti-government protests. This disillusionment opened the door to reformism, paving the way for a charismatic Abiy Ahmed, driven by *Medemer* centralism⁸. This quest for unification clashed head-on with the Ethiopian constitutional framework, becoming a threat to Tigrayan political

⁷ The new Ethiopia encompassed Semitic, Cushitic, Omotic and Nilo-Saharan languages, and religions such as animism, Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

⁸ A political ideology developed by Abiy Ahmed based on the unity, cooperation and prosperity of Ethiopia.

capital. The constitutionally established system favoured the representation of a non-majority ethnic group, the Tigrayans, whilst strategically placing the TPLF at the centre of power, thereby preventing the growth of the opposition (Molfino, 2021: 93-101). Despite the ethnic references, what was really at stake at that time was the seat of power.

In 2020, the TPLF governed Tigray regionally and organised its own elections despite the federal government's rejection, which had postponed them as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The freezing of budgetary funds in Tigray and the outlawing of its legislative assembly led to a Tigrayan attack on a central army base, triggering the start of the Tigray War on 4 November 2020.

During the war, the cognitive domain was as important a battlefield as the land and air domains. 'Deception,' said Sun Tzu, 'is the source of inspiration for war and, in my view, it is in the vacuum of reality that it thrives best.' The central government imposed a communications blackout, leading to a narrative siege waged through the weapons of social media. Ahmed's narrative power homogenised public opinion, portraying the Tigrayans as a threat to the unity of Greater Ethiopia and justifying the war as an operation to maintain order (Van Reisen and Mawere, 2024). The narratives dehumanising the Tigrayan people laid the groundwork for a loss of restraint, unleashing an explosion of targeted and systematic violence against them.

This conflict, and the ethnic cleansing, lasted for two years and claimed, according to estimates, 800,000 lives (Weldemichel in Palacián de Inza, 2025a). Today, the Tigray region continues to bleed, as the peace terms signed in the Pretoria Agreement (2022) have not healed and that wound is now becoming infected. The Ethiopian giant faintly hears the melody of war, in which one can discern, on the one hand, Eritrean drums amplified by the failure of the Pretoria peace provisions and, on the other, Egyptian and Sudanese trumpets spurred on by the Ethiopian Grand Renaissance Dam's capacity to alter the flow of the Nile.

4.2 Sudan: a broken state

The Republic of Sudan is a vast expanse of land that acts as a bridge between Arab-Islamic Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. The Nile River, which is much more than just a river, runs through it,

acting as its backbone. Furthermore, it is a deeply multi-ethnic country in which Arab ethnic groups have historically enjoyed a privileged position, perpetuating a structural inequality that serves as a source of perpetual conflict.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, slavery was a common practice in the Islamic sultanates located in what is now Sudan. Raids into the south, where predominantly non-Arab peoples lived, were carried out to capture slaves, creating deep social divides. This practice continued during the Turkiyya period and under Mahdist rule, and was banned during the Anglo-Egyptian condominium.

During this period, and particularly from 1929 onwards, the British based their administration on the 'southern policy'⁹, accelerating political transition solely in the north of the country (Alaminos, 2023: 1-29). The systematic marginalisation of the south, historically perceived as a peripheral region of exploitation, was aggressively perpetuated during the condominium. The south developed a nationalist ideology naturally opposed to the north's exploitative mindset, generating a historical pattern of inequality and instability and perpetuating civil war as a form of governance (Alaminos, 2023: 1-29).

In 1955, the first Sudanese civil war began, also known as the Anya-Nya Rebellion¹⁰ (1955-1972), leading to independence a year later. Later, in 1969, Yafaar al-Numeiry orchestrated a *coup d'état*, immediately imposing Sharia law, which fuelled tensions between the Muslim north and the non-Arab south, subsequently triggering the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005).

In 1985, in the midst of the war, Al-Numeiry was overthrown and, following a brief democratic interlude, Omar al-Bashir, with the support of Hassan al-Turabi's National Islamic Front, carried out another *coup d'état* in 1989. Al-Bashir pursued an extremist religious policy by harbouring Osama bin Laden, which led to his international isolation and sanctions. The rift between the Muslim Arab peoples and the non-Arab peoples of the south grew ever wider.

In 2003, a series of violent conflicts broke out in the Darfur region between local communities and nomadic Arab herders, as a result

⁹ The Southern Policy was a British colonial strategy that sought to administer the southern provinces separately, deepening divisions, with the ultimate aim of limiting the spread of Arab and Islamic influence in the southern regions.

¹⁰ 'Anya-Nya' is a term from the Ma'di language meaning 'snake venom', recalling the strategy adopted by southern insurgents to wage asymmetric warfare against northern troops and the central government.

of desertification in the area. This conflict escalated rapidly, as the central government sided with the Arab groups, supplying them with weapons that were used to carry out attacks supported by military helicopters and followed by mounted militias who raped, killed and looted (Sosa, 2004). The militias responsible for carrying out the massacres, the *Janjaweed*¹¹, were integrated over the years into the army under the name Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and, thanks to their control over Darfur's gold reserves, gained autonomy and power.

By 2004, the war was drawing to a close, giving way to a peace agreement between the north and south of the country and guaranteeing the south six years of autonomy, as well as the subsequent holding of a referendum on independence. In 2011, South Sudan finally gained independence and, as a result, Khartoum lost three-quarters of its oil revenues, triggering a currency devaluation and drastically weakening its economic base (Suvire, 2022).

In 2018, a series of protests fuelled by this socio-economic decline brought down Al-Bashir's regime, creating a power vacuum. Between 2018 and 2023, Sudan experienced a cycle of democratic restorations and collapses. The instability led the head of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), Al-Burhan, and the leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Hemedti, to seize power in 2021, citing necessity and promising an early civilian handover. Social protests continued, as it was clear that neither was willing to relinquish this source of power.

Al-Burhan, uncomfortable with the balance of power *vis-à-vis* Hemedti, incorporated some ten thousand of his troops into the central command; Hemedti, suspecting an attempt to dilute his army, launched an attack on military detachments in Khartoum (Gutiérrez, 2025). On 15 April 2023, the third Sudanese civil war began and, since then, the two major backers of the conflict—the United Arab Emirates (UAE), supporting the FAR, and Egypt, supporting the SAF—have sustained the confrontation, profiting from the informal gold trade facilitated by the chaos of the war. Indeed, whilst the UAE was becoming, for this reason, a global hub for the gold trade (Soliman and Baldo, 2025), the United Nations (UN) described the conflict in Sudan as the world's largest and most devastating humanitarian crisis (United Nations, 2025).

¹¹ It is an Arabic term commonly translated as 'devils on horseback' and refers to the militias which, in coordination with Omar al-Bashir, harassed and massacred the Fur people.

4.3 Somalia: a dandelion

During the colonial era, Somali territory was divided into three parts: British Somaliland, French Somaliland and Italian Somalia. Upon gaining independence in 1960, Somali frustration set in, as parts of Greater Somalia¹² remained within the borders of its neighbours: Ethiopia, Kenya and present-day Djibouti (Díez, 2021). This irredentism put an end to an initial attempt at democracy, enabling Mohamed Siad Barre to carry out a *coup d'état* in 1969 and establish a tyrannical regime based on a system of clan-based checks and balances.

As soon as the regime began to falter during the critical 1970s, Barre strengthened the hegemony of his own clan by sidelining the rest from political power, thereby shattering the fundamental pillar of social coexistence in Somalia (Díez, 2021). As the Somali state fragmented, non-state actors interested in monopolising force emerged from the cracks, giving rise to a war over the redistribution of power shares.

In the 1980s, clan conflicts toppled Barre, leaving an open wound and causing divisions within the country, such as the independence of Somaliland in 1991—recognised by no one except Israel—and the contested autonomy of Puntland in 1998. During this decade, the country became an anarchic space, with chaos reigning supreme, seriously undermining the fundamental pillars of the state. Somalia 'sank into total chaos and the most absolute lawlessness, with warlords from the various clans wielding power in a totally fragmented and violent "non-state territory"' (Díez, 2021: 144).

Mogadishu became one of the areas most affected by clan-based struggles for control of the neighbourhoods. Amid this disorder, radical Islam operated as a unifying force in a context of absolute crisis. Although the majority of Somalis were Sufis¹³, they accepted local Islamic courts as a corrective measure, as these filled the vacuum left by the disappearance of the police and the judicial system (Wise, 2011).

¹² An ideological concept seeking to unify under a single state all regions of the Horn of Africa inhabited by the Somali ethnic group.

¹³ A mystical branch of Islam that seeks spiritual union with God through purification of the heart, prayer and meditation.

In 2006, the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) established itself in the capital and began to spread across the rest of the country, causing concern in Ethiopia, which, with the backing of the United Nations (Resolution 1725) and the African Union (AU), launched a military operation enabling the weak Transitional Federal Government (TFG) to retake the capital. This coup fragmented the UTI, splitting it into two factions: the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia, and the Al-Shabaab guerrilla group, which exploited the narrative of resistance against the invader as a powerful ideological rallying cry.

Once the Ethiopian troops withdrew in 2009, the fragility of the Transitional Federal Government became apparent. A year later, Al-Shabaab would emerge as a dominant insurgent force, which 'came to control virtually the whole of southern Somalia and a significant part of the centre, with Kismayo as its first urban stronghold' (Corte, 2015: 8). In 2011, a severe drought and famine ravaged the country, and offensives by AMISOM¹⁴, the GFT and other militias against Al-Shabaab weakened the group, forcing its transformation from an insurgent militia into a terrorist group.

Although Somalia has been undergoing a constant process of national reconstruction since 2011, Al-Shabaab has managed to continue influencing its political life, carrying out serious attacks in Somalia and Kenya and playing an important role as a parallel power structure (Contreras, 2025). The group has demonstrated an exceptional capacity to withstand attacks. Other contributing factors, such as piracy in the waters off the Somali coast, contribute—albeit to a decreasing extent—to the country's political stagnation.

On 26 December 2025, Israel became the first UN member state to recognise the State of Somaliland. This geopolitical shift, which positions Israel closer to the Gulf of Aden, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea, seriously challenges Somalia's sovereignty and severely disrupts the region's delicate balance, adding yet another thorn in Somalia's side.

4.4 Djibouti: the base of operations

The Republic of Djibouti is surrounded by four neighbours: to the north by Eritrea, to the west and south by the giant Ethiopia, to

¹⁴ African Union mission in Somalia, backed by the UN.

the west by the (*de facto*) independent Somaliland, and to the east it borders the Red Sea and opens onto the Gulf of Aden. Its president, Ismail Omar Guelleh, has ruled continuously since 1999, with the sole constitutional limit on his term of office being an age limit set at 75.

Djibouti is a stable geostrategic enclave in a turbulent region. On the one hand, 'it does not usually experience episodes of ethnic violence, despite the civil war that ravaged the country between 1991 and 1994 due to clashes between the Issa and Afar peoples' (Office of Diplomatic Information, 2025: 2). On the other hand, its geographical position has made it one of the guardians of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, overseeing one of the key geographical chokepoints for global trade in general, and for oil and hydrocarbons in particular (Sánchez and Palacián de Inza, 2018). For this reason, Djibouti, situated in a region of prime geostrategic importance, has proved highly attractive to the international community, becoming a hub for international military bases.

Despite its apparent stability, Djibouti is situated in a highly volatile region, both on land and at sea. Threats from its neighbours—terrorism in Somalia, Eritrea's aggressive foreign policy and the conflict in Sudan—could spill over. Furthermore, Somali piracy and Houthi attacks on commercial vessels have turned the sea into a minefield. In 2023, 'pirates suddenly reappeared off the Somali coast, coinciding with the start of attacks by the Houthis, *Ansar Allah*, on commercial vessels in the Red Sea' (Beales *et al.*, 2026).

On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel launched an offensive against Iran, unleashing a wave of bombings that has spread across several countries in West Asia. Two days after the attacks that resulted in the death of, among others, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately one-fifth of the world's trade in oil and liquefied natural gas passes.

In the event of an escalation, the Iranian regime could attempt, through its Houthi allies, to close the Bab el-Mandeb Strait—a strategic chokepoint shared by Yemen and Djibouti—with the aim of further disrupting global transport routes. This scenario would mean a blockade of exports from the Gulf, affecting Saudi Arabia in particular, and would alter shipping routes, extending the

journey by between three thousand and four thousand nautical miles, which would drastically increase transport costs (Mekki, 2026).

Over time, Djibouti has become the anchor of stability in the Horn of Africa, increasing its international appeal and thereby ensuring its own survival. Despite the internal governance challenges it still faces, such as corruption and authoritarianism, the country has successfully exploited its strategic position by acting as the tollgate and hub of the Red Sea.

4.5 Eritrea: state anxiety

The unitary state of Eritrea shares borders with the Red Sea, Sudan, Ethiopia and Djibouti. Its president, Isaias Afwerki, has held power uninterrupted since 1993. Eritrea is considered the 'North Korea of Africa' due to its low levels of liberal democracy and high levels of isolation, repression and authoritarianism.

When the Ethiopians and British defeated Mussolini in 1935, they also regained the territory of Eritrea, which raised a series of questions regarding what to do with it, as its population was divided and polarised around two political projects: Eritrean Muslim independence activists and Ethiopian Christian unionists.

In 1952, the UN decided that Eritrea should form a federation with Ethiopia while retaining considerable autonomy; however, the absolutist Ethiopian regime imposed a series of decrees and unilateral measures, such as the ban on teaching in Eritrean languages and their replacement with Amharic, the dismantling of industries and their relocation to Addis Ababa, and the repression of Eritrean trade unions and political parties (Plaut, 2018). This exercise of power generated resistance that took the form of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which was predominantly Christian and Marxist. Nevertheless, in 1962, the federation was dissolved and Eritrea was directly swallowed up by Ethiopia.

Between 1974 and 1975, the Ethiopian empire fell, the *Derg* socialist regime came to power, and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), also Marxist, was founded in northern Ethiopia, joining the war already being waged by the EPLF. Despite their ideological and nationalist differences, they maintained tactical cooperation due to the demands of the war (Plaut, 2018). In 1991, the TPLF overthrew and replaced the *Derg*, and the EPLF

took Asmara and secured independence for their nation. After seven years of friction between the two victors, the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia broke out in 1998.

Two years later, this bloody battle was forcibly brought to an end by a series of international agreements, to which Ethiopia, which held a significant military advantage, expressed its rejection, leading to a sort of 'cold peace' between the two countries (Müller, 2011). Eritrea exploited this grey area to justify the need for an unusually large standing army to prevent any future attack (Müller, 2011), leading to a gradual *fortification* and securitisation of the state.

This narrative of external threat has served as a pretext for denying the population their fundamental rights and freedoms of opinion and expression, of organisation and assembly, and of practising their religious beliefs (Tronvoll, 2009). According to the *V-DEM Democracy Report 2025* (V-DEM, 2025), Eritrea's political system is a closed autocracy, ranking as the country with the lowest liberal democracy index in the world. This organisation of power 'narrowed the political space in an alarming manner, leaving no room or tolerance for opposition or dissent, which led to a sustained situation of international isolation' (Molfino, 2020: 41).

In 2018, Ethiopia and Eritrea organised a peace summit following twenty years of low-intensity conflict, an event that led to Abiy Ahmed being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. However, two years later the Tigray War began, pitting the Ethiopian central government against the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF), led by the historic TPLF. Eritrea supported this military intervention, making it an accomplice to the war crimes committed during the conflict. In 2022, the Pretoria Peace Agreement was signed, but it subsequently failed to deliver on key provisions such as the disarmament of Tigrayan forces, the withdrawal of Eritrean troops and the return of one million people who remain in displacement camps with limited aid. These failures, coupled with Ethiopia's aspirations for access to the Red Sea¹⁵, have created a climate of tension, leading to a series of political frictions¹⁶. The sparks

¹⁵ The Ethiopian Prime Minister, whilst ruling out invading Eritrea to gain access to the Red Sea, considers that such access is nonetheless a matter of vital importance for Ethiopia (Swissinfo, 2025).

¹⁶ On Monday 9 February 2026, the Eritrean Government denied Ethiopia's accusations, accusing Asmara of deploying Eritrean troops and making incursions into Ethiopian territory, as well as collaborating with rebel groups on its north-western border (Swissinfo, 2026).

arising from this historical back-and-forth could ignite another fire along this volatile shared border.

4.6 South Sudan: growing pains

South Sudan is the world's youngest country, having been the last to join the UN in 2011. States, like people, need time to grow, and South Sudan is going through a turbulent adolescence (Palacián de Inza, 2025b). Its secession was the result of a long-standing marginalisation of the peoples of Southern Sudan. A year after secession, South Sudanese President Salva Kiir suspended oil exports to Sudan, despite the fact that 98% of South Sudan's state revenue derives from this activity (Pérez and Nin, 2024). A clumsy decision that highlighted the economic interdependence binding the two countries.

While South Sudan was still in its infancy, President Salva Kiir dismissed his vice-president, Riek Machar, accusing him of plotting a coup and triggering a premature civil war (2013-2018). Soon, this political rivalry spilled over into the ethnic arena, leading to bloody clashes between the Dinka (Kiir) and Nuer (Machar) ethnic groups (Contreras, 2021).

As the war progressed, a series of peace agreements were proposed. The first in 2015, driven by the international community, and the second in 2018, spearheaded by Omar al-Bashir, who needed to restore the flow of South Sudanese oil and sought to improve his international image in order to be removed from the list of state sponsors of terrorism (Contreras, 2021). In 2020, this agreement was finalised, leading to the return of the same government as in 2013, with Kiir as president and Machar as his vice-president.

Both lost 'all their political and social credibility, and with their belligerent attitude, they have undermined any political and social project that fosters national identity and economic development' (Díez, 2014). In March 2025, the White Army, a Nuer militia, clashed with the government army in the city of Nasir, resulting in a dozen deaths. This attack was linked to Machar, and he was arrested that same month. On 1 March 2026, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, stated that South Sudan is at a dangerous juncture (The European Times, 2026).

The fledgling state of South Sudan will soon come of age, but first it must adopt a strong vision of statehood that drives it to renew

its political elite, distribute power equitably, curb corruption and promote justice. This wound that South Sudan bears will only heal with proper care.

5 The responsibility to protect and to know: humanitarian pain

The edges of this world have folded inwards, as if in origami. The globalised, fluid world, dominated by flows, has become small, and local life has become intertwined with complex and diverse global phenomena that weaken the state and may even lead to its collapse (Aznar, 2025). This concern has turned the world into a regional security complex (RSC) in its own right. Despite this, 'there are not enough governance institutions, nor has the law evolved at a sufficient pace to meet the regulatory needs of international society' (Aznar, 2025). This has weakened the international architecture, once built upon the ruins of the Second World War, leading to international disorder.

At the United Nations World Summit (2005), the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was adopted, redefining the state's role in safeguarding its population from atrocities, whilst also establishing the international community as having subsidiary responsibility (Palacián de Inza, 2024). This summit coincided with the first genocide in Darfur, which was later seen as a failure of the protection mechanism that had just been adopted (Palacián de Inza, 2024). The failure of the UN, the AU and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to effectively address the crises in the Horn of Africa highlighted the international community's limitations in managing the changing dynamics of conflicts in the region (Gaid, 2024).

The supranational ideal has gradually fragmented and merged into regionalisation, causing internal walls to disappear whilst external borders were reinforced (Aznar, 2025). Tectonic clashes between plates of power have created earthquakes capable of fragmenting the world and forming fissures through which new threats emerge, driven by the inertia of the law of the strongest. International failure and the negligence of local leaders have forcibly shifted responsibility to civil society, which, in the interests of improving protection mechanisms, must adopt the moral principle of the responsibility to know (R2K) (Palacián de Inza, 2024). From this point onwards, through the ethical duty to inform and be correctly informed, it will be possible to rebuild the

mechanisms for prevention, action and redress in a conflict zone where more than 220 million people live.

6 Conclusions

Exploring the roots of conflict in the Horn of Africa often leads to ethnicity being viewed as the central axis of friction. Contrary to popular belief, ethnicity plays a role that is more mobilising than causative. To seek the origin of conflict outside the human being is to flounder in the dark, since it resides like a benign cyst within each individual. Power, through the exercise of politics, institutionalises misfortune, and when this abounds, it tends to be ignored by the media. Social media has relativised distance and empathy, accustoming society to the constant sight of people dying on television.

The Horn of Africa has become a battleground where local ambition and foreign interests converge, with the force of this clash bearing down on those who work the land. Governance in the Horn of Africa is entirely interconnected; therefore, pulling a thread in Eritrea could unravel Ethiopia and, in a domino effect, destabilise Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and Djibouti. This region of the world must think of itself as a single entity, taking into account each country's particular governance logic and collaborating, through dialogue, to establish the best possible peace.

This shipwrecked world, in international disarray, watches from the shore as the ships of multilateralism sink and human rights run aground, shifting that responsibility onto civil society. We citizens must renew our perception of political participation, exercising our right to inform ourselves and be informed, with the ultimate aim of steering this drift towards war back on course.

The Horn of Africa is much more than its conflicts, even though its disputes define it. The land of this region, despite being overshadowed in the media by violence, is brimming with human wealth, which is the most precious of all riches.

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Chapter Two

New powers in the Horn of Africa: the end of Western hegemony

Blanca Palacián de Inza

Abstract

By 2026, the Horn of Africa has established itself as the epicentre of a new post-Western order, transforming into a market of transactional interests where geography is the supreme asset. This chapter analyses how states such as Ethiopia and Somalia manage fragmented sovereignty by leasing plots of authority to emerging powers. While China maintains structural control through debt and concrete, the United Arab Emirates positions itself as the strategic flow manager, controlling liquidity and maritime access. Turkey emerges as a benchmark for smart power, blending defence and culture, while Western actors (USA and EU) are relegated to welfare and life-support roles, signalling the end of traditional hegemony over Red Sea *security*.

Keywords

Chessboard geopolitics, Smart power, Debt, Survival pragmatism, Multipolarity.

1 Introduction: the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa today serves as a strategic pivot where the security of the Red Sea intersects with the ambitions of emerging powers (the UAE, Turkey, Saudi Arabia) and global powers (China, Russia, the US).



Figure 1. Map of the Horn of Africa. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Given this privileged location, it must be understood that the strategic importance of this region is particularly significant because it connects Africa, the Middle East and Asia, making it vital for international maritime security, global trade and the geopolitical stability of the Middle East and Europe. It is a crystal-clear African example of 'chessboard geopolitics': the concept Brzezinski applied to Eurasia in *The Grand Chessboard* when he highlighted that certain regions, even if peripheral, hold a key position on trade routes because they harbour resources or are situated near rival powers. The Horn of Africa more than meets these three conditions.

Thus, Eritrea holds strategic importance of the first order due to its ports at Assab and Massawa. Djibouti, although a small country, enjoys a location on the Bab el-Mandeb Strait that makes it significant in the eyes of foreign powers. Somalia is a double-edged sword, for whilst it is key to maritime trade, it is equally central to regional conflicts. Finally, Ethiopia, by far the largest country in the region, compensates for its lack of access to the sea with its political and economic clout.

The region is rich in critical minerals, gold, oil, gas and arable land, as well as in what is known as the blue economy. Furthermore, the four countries have regional and international significance—and, consequently, rivalry. It is on this last point—their international ambitions and presence—that this chapter will focus.

MATRIZ DE INFLUENCIA ESTRATÉGICA

PAÍS	EEUU	CHINA	RUSIA	FRANCIA	TURQUÍA	EAU	A.SAUDÍ	CATAR	UE	ITALIA
ERITREA										
YIBUTI										
SOMALIA										
ETIOPÍA										

CÓDIGO DE INTENSIDAD:

- Verde: Influencia **muy destacada** (Socio estratégico de primer orden).
- Mixto: Influencia **notable** (Combinación de intereses o peso compartido)
- Amarillo: Influencia **media** (Socio relevante, pero con menor peso político)
- Blanco/Gris: Influencia **baja o nula**.

2 Eritrea

With an area of less than 120,000 km²—a quarter the size of Spain—Eritrea is a small geopolitical giant, the David of the Red Sea, whose coastline makes it a key and powerful player in international security and trade (Yeh, 2026). Eritrea controls the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, one of the world's most critical trade routes due to its geographical position, but also because of its port infrastructure.

Under the leadership of Isaias Afwerki, the country has evolved from extreme isolation to becoming a strategic player that leverages its coastline to attract powers seeking a presence in the Red Sea.

2.1 China

China's presence in Eritrea is deep-rooted and structural, based on a strategic partnership consolidated over decades of mutual support. Unlike other actors, China is Eritrea's main trading partner and a key ally in its long-term development strategy (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Eritrea, 2024).

Chinese companies are thus involved in mining projects—for example, they operate the Bisha mine, the country's largest producer of zinc and copper—infrastructure modernisation—ports and roads, and investment in telecommunications (Kun, 2026)—and the sale of manufactured goods to Eritrea—ranging from heavy construction machinery to electronics and textiles.

2.2 Russia

Moscow's influence in Eritrea stems from its desire to maintain a growing strategic presence focused on military and defence cooperation, as well as diplomatic ties, in the Red Sea. The Kremlin exploits these links with Asmara to mitigate the diplomatic isolation it faces and to consolidate a platform for maritime projection in the Red Sea region. The relationship between the two countries is more political than economic.

Eritrea is one of the few countries that publicly supports Russia in international forums. A significant example of this was its 'No' vote on the resolution calling for an end to the Russian offensive in Ukraine at the UN General Assembly in March 2022 (United

Nations, 2022). For its part, Russia, a member of the UN Security Council, protects Eritrea with its veto (Méndez Urich, 2021).

Furthermore, Russia sells arms to and trains the Eritrean Armed Forces. Moscow does not, as yet, have an operational military base in the African country, but there is naval cooperation and Russian frigates (TurDef, 2024) use the port of Massawa (Africa Defense Forum, 2023).

2.3 United Arab Emirates

In 2015, the UAE and Eritrea signed a thirty-year lease agreement for the port and airport of Assab. Abu Dhabi's aim was to establish a military base there for its war with Yemen, which had begun that year and has been in a lull since 2022.

With tensions easing, Abu Dhabi has focused its efforts on southern Yemen, prioritising control of strategic ports such as Aden and Mukalla by supporting its allies in the area. After beginning the dismantling of its base in Assab in 2021 (Associated Press, 2021), it abandoned it permanently in 2026.

At the same time, it has prioritised its relationship with Egypt, where it is the largest foreign investor, leading to a definitive estrangement from Eritrea. Saudi Arabia has capitalised on this vacuum, positioning itself as Asmara's new preferred partner (McGregor, 2023).

2.4 Saudi Arabia

For the Saudis, Eritrea is a key component of their security architecture and their ambition to establish themselves as a 'global logistics hub', a central objective of Vision 2030 (Saudi Arabia, n.d.). The new regional landscape, marked by the strategic withdrawal of the United Arab Emirates, has facilitated the implementation of this vision and reinforced Riyadh's leadership in the Red Sea (Ardemagni, 2024). As a first step, Saudi Arabia has announced multi-billion-dollar investments to modernise the port of Assab, with the aim of transforming it into a commercial hub capable of competing with Djibouti (Horn Review, 2025) and securing its control over the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

Whilst Abu Dhabi is pursuing a disruptive policy—supporting Ethiopia or Somaliland (Saudi Arabia, n.d.)—Riyadh has formed a

containment bloc bringing together Egypt¹, Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan under its influence. By leading this coalition, Saudi Arabia exercises effective hegemony over both shores. In the words of the analyst, Rebecca Mulugeta (2026), the kingdom now 'owns the waves of the Red Sea'.

In this new situation, Eritrea finds in Saudi backing a guarantee of security against Ethiopia's ambitions to regain a sovereign outlet to the sea. In turn, Eritrea serves as a containment barrier for Iran in the Red Sea for Riyadh (Zina, 2025).

2.5 France

France is not a new player in the region; however, its collaboration with Eritrea is not particularly close, as the French concentrate their resources in Djibouti, where they maintain their largest military base on the African continent.

France's relationship with Asmara is more one of strategic vigilance and the pursuit of a regional balance that prevents the emergence of a hostile hegemonic power. Its primary interest is to prevent instability that could jeopardise navigation through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a vital chokepoint for the European Union's economic security (Maiz, 2025).

Through patrol missions from Djibouti (Bernacchi, 2025) and cooperation on maritime intelligence, Paris seeks to ensure that the growing presence of external powers in Massawa and Assab does not lead to a tactical blockade of the trade corridor, positioning itself as a moderating force in an increasingly polarised landscape.

2.6 Italy

Italy's presence in Eritrea goes beyond the commercial sphere; it represents a geopolitical commitment to security and migration control under the framework of the Mattei Plan (El Debate, 2024) for Africa, promoted by Giorgia Meloni's Government. Rome operates on the premise of applied external security: to economically stabilise Isaias Afwerki's regime and strengthen its border control

¹ Economically, Egypt is an ally of the United Arab Emirates. Militarily, it is an ally of Saudi Arabia. Cairo is radically opposed to any redrawing of borders in the Red Sea or the Nile.

capabilities to reduce migration flows towards the Italian coast, investing at source to mitigate the crisis in the Mediterranean.

Italy is capitalising on a latent cultural connection—the use of the language and the architectural heritage in Asmara—to position itself as the ‘natural partner’ *vis-à-vis* actors such as Russia or China, perceived as powers alien to local sensibilities.

Italy is applying its own ‘pragmatism of survival’ to ensure its relevance in the Horn of Africa. At the time of writing this chapter, discussions are underway to develop critical infrastructure in Massawa and, potentially, in Assab, with the aim of reintegrating Eritrea into global markets and preventing the Red Sea coastline from falling under the exclusive control of Eurasian blocs (Berhane, 2025).

In conclusion, Eritrea has established itself in the eyes of global powers as a ‘natural aircraft carrier’ in the Red Sea. Whilst the UAE has ceded ground to Saudi Arabia, which sees Asmara as a security shield and a hub for its economic expansion, other actors define their presence according to specific interests. Thus, Russia views it as a strategic military foothold; France, as a stabilising factor requiring constant monitoring from Djibouti; and Italy, as a key partner for migration management and infrastructure development under the Mattei Plan.

3 Djibouti

Djibouti is a small country—about the size of the Community of Madrid—which has made the leasing of its land its main source of income. It enjoys a privileged geographical location and a stability that is difficult to disrupt (Sánchez Martín, 2018)—it maintains a peace guaranteed by external interests—qualities that make this small republic an object of desire.

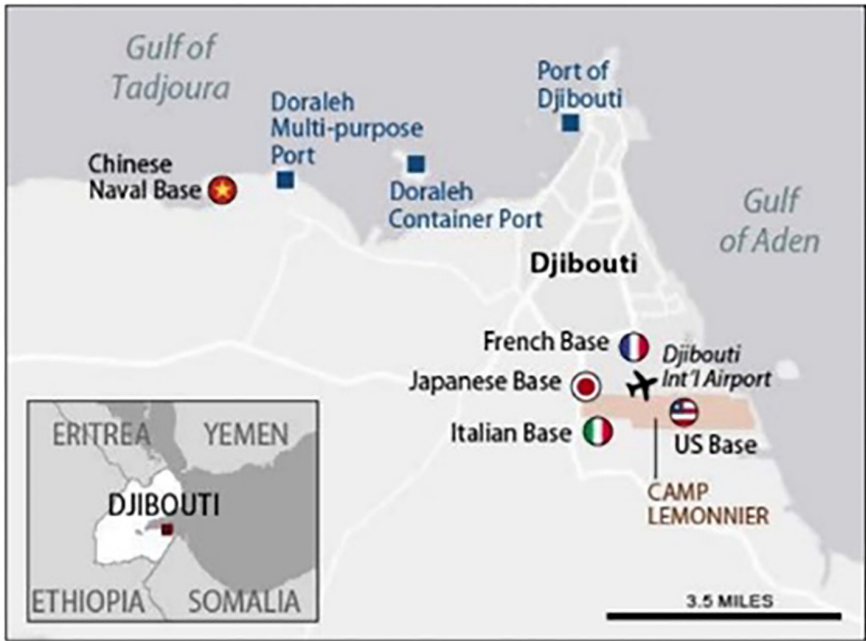
This does not mean that it is free from internal tensions, such as ethnic conflict, inequality or migratory pressure. Ultimately, the country’s fragility is kept in check by international powers that demand stability for their own ends, requiring Djibouti to serve as a strategic hub that must remain operational 24/7.

Djibouti’s flagship products are this aforementioned stability and its location, but they are no longer the only ones. This small country has evolved, moving from living solely off the leasing of land and ports to transforming its territory into the world’s

most strategic service hub, charging global powers for its use (De Waal, 2017: 14). It has moved beyond being a passive rentier to becoming a hub for logistical, digital and military services.

Djibouti is no longer just a military base for foreign powers; it is now the critical infrastructure, its services and maintenance, that connect Africa with the rest of the world (Du Couëdic, 2025). It is the paradox of survival: Djibouti is too small to be a threat, but increasingly too important not to be defended. In this way, it turns its weakness into its strength.

This need to be defended is put to the test following the war waged by Israel and the United States against Iran, which began in March 2026, and the subsequent events. Tehran has established itself as a player capable of disrupting maritime routes; a power with marginal influence compared to the financial might of the Gulf states or Turkey, but with a capacity for asymmetric sabotage that could upset the relative stability of the entire Horn of Africa.



Map showing ports and foreign military bases in Djibouti. Source: CRS

3.1 United States

Since the 11 September attacks, the United States has leased Camp Lemonnier to Djibouti. It is the only permanent US base in Africa and also, or precisely for that reason, its most critical facility as it serves as its nerve centre on the continent (SwissInfo, 2017). Its significance lies in its ability to project immediate military power across two continents and monitor access to the Red Sea.

Camp Lemonnier acts as a force multiplier. The US contingent's primary mission is not the defence of the facility, but the management of an advanced technological infrastructure from which counter-terrorism operations and drone missions against Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda are directed.

The US thus positions itself as the guarantor of regional security, more interested in who manages the ports than in administering them directly, thereby preventing the flow of crude oil from falling under the control of rivals such as Iran or China. For its part, the UK maintains a reduced presence, relying on US logistics for technical stopovers.

3.2 China

Opened in 2017, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Support Base in Djibouti, a few kilometres from the US base, was China's first military facility abroad.

This base grants China naval power and also secures China's economic control over the country, underpinned by the overwhelming debt² and the construction of the port of Doraleh and the railway to Ethiopia.

Unlike Camp Lemonnier, which focuses on counter-terrorism, the Chinese base prioritises the protection of its trade routes and serves as a hub for its long-range expeditions³. To this end, China employs a 'dual-use' strategy: civilian infrastructure that evolves into military capabilities (Stone and Wood, n.d.). This

² China is Djibouti's largest creditor. According to the US Congressional Research Service (CRS), Chinese institutions (primarily the Exim Bank of China) hold more than 50% of the country's total external debt. See: https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF11304/IF11304.5.pdf

³ See: https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF11304/IF11304.5.pdf

is an 'opportunistic evolution' in which commercial ports end up hosting warships and aircraft carriers, functioning as multidimensional tools for military intelligence and logistics (Kennedy and Brzozowski, 2025). This 'civil-military fusion', dictated by the Communist Party (U.S. Department of State, n.d.), contrasts with the purely military deployment of the US.

Financially, China is Djibouti's largest creditor (International Monetary Fund, 2025). Such debt grants Beijing an informal veto over the country's decisions and compromises its economic autonomy. This financial stranglehold is precisely what explains why Djibouti is seeking a strategic counterweight in Saudi Arabia to diversify its support.

Today, China remains the power with the greatest structural presence in Djibouti, although Saudi Arabia is the actor most rapidly challenging its political and strategic ground.

3.3 Saudi Arabia

A Djibouti suffocated by debt to Beijing compromises its sovereignty, a scenario that Saudi Arabia seeks to reverse to prevent a strategic neighbour from depending on a single power. By intervening in Djibouti's financial relief through refinancing or direct investment, Riyadh not only reinforces its role as a regional power but also secures an advantageous position in any future diplomatic negotiations.

Saudi Arabia is rapidly increasing its presence and influence in Djibouti, whilst that of the United Arab Emirates is waning, making it an emerging leader.

Currently, its strategy rests on two commercial pillars. In 2024, it secured the concession for a strategic logistics zone, guaranteeing a direct route for its exports to the continent (Agenzia Nova, 2024a). A year later, it consolidated this expansion through the company Red Sea Gateway Terminal, which secured the concession to operate the port of Tadjourah (Kontos, 2025).

On the military front, negotiations remain pending for the opening of its first overseas military base, which is planned specifically on Djiboutian soil to complete its security architecture on both sides of the Red Sea.

3.4 Turkey

Whilst Saudi Arabia is currently focusing on port and trade logistics, Turkey is working to establish a presence that shapes identity and distances itself from criticism that highlights purely financial interests. A prime example is the Ambouli Friendship Dam, completed in 2019. Funded and built by Turkey, it protects the capital—home to 75% of the population—from catastrophic flooding whilst helping to replenish groundwater reserves.

In line with its regional strategy of cultural outreach, Turkey has built the country's largest mosque, the Abdulhamid II Mosque (Mundo Islam, 2019), consolidating its role as a religious leader. At the same time, it has established itself as a key technological and defence partner through the sale of drones (Baykar, 2022), the training of Djiboutian troops and the supply of tactical equipment. Currently, Ankara shows no interest in establishing a military base in Djibouti—given that it already has a major facility in Somalia—, preferring to maintain its role as a civilian ally and religious brother in the Horn of Africa.

3.5 Russia

Russia lacks a military base in Djibouti due to persistent diplomatic and financial pressure from the United States on the Djiboutian Government. The US refusal could also be the reason why its attempts to establish a base in Port Sudan are failing (Sudan Tribune, 2025). Faced with this scenario of exclusion, Moscow has redirected its strategy towards Eritrea to secure its 'share of the pie' in controlling the Red Sea. The Kremlin considers its presence in this sea lane to be an absolute priority.

3.6 France

The French presence is the oldest and largest of the European Union in the country. It is consolidated through its BA 188 base, the largest on the African continent for the French, to maintain its influence and provide a platform for its operations in the Sahel and the Indian Ocean.

Unlike other actors, France's relationship with Djibouti is defined by an existential commitment: through a defence cooperation treaty, Paris guarantees the territorial integrity of the Djiboutian

state. This security clause, Article 4, implies that, in the event of any external aggression or attempted invasion, France is legally obliged to intervene militarily (French Republic, 2014).

3.7 Spain, Italy and Germany

The European Union's presence is primarily focused on the security of trade routes under the mandate of Operation Atalanta (Ministry of Defence, n.d.)—focused on combating piracy—and also through the EUNAVFOR ASPIDES mission (European Union, n.d.), whose continuation until February 2026 is critical to protecting maritime traffic from asymmetric threats and Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.

Lacking sovereign facilities, countries such as Spain and Germany operate under the umbrella of French infrastructure. Spain maintains the Orion Detachment (Ministry of Defence, 2024) of the Air and Space Force deployed at the French base under the Atalanta framework, providing vital maritime patrol and electronic surveillance capabilities. Italy, by contrast, represents an exception within the bloc as it has a permanent base, which not only supports EU naval missions but also serves as a key logistical hub for its own strategic interests in Somalia and in containing migration flows.

3.8 Japan

The establishment of the Japan Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) facility in Djibouti represents a historic milestone. It is Tokyo's first and only military base outside its archipelago since the end of the Second World War. Although its original deployment in 2011 was justified under the mandate of combating piracy in the Gulf of Aden, by February 2026 its mission had shifted towards a purely strategic function (Japan, 2022: 29).

Japan has significantly expanded the base in a deliberate effort to counter the hegemony of the neighbouring Chinese base (Kubo, 2026). This expansion not only seeks to protect its vital supply routes, but is also part of Japan's new security doctrine, which aims for a proactive presence in the Indo-Pacific and the Red Sea.

3.9 Qatar and the United Arab Emirates

Qatar acted as a mediator in the border dispute between Djibouti and Eritrea (Reuters, 2017). It is an investor in the hotel sector

and in humanitarian projects. The United Arab Emirates, for its part, has a strained relationship with the region and, since its expulsion from the port of Doraleh in 2018—a space subsequently occupied by China—its presence has shifted to the ports of Eritrea and Somalia.

The coexistence of different powers reflects the fact that the country is now a key hub in the global balance of power. With bases just 12 kilometres apart, Djibouti has become a hotbed of tension where rival soldiers keep a watchful eye on one another through binoculars and radar. Any miscalculation in this 'cold peace' could rapidly escalate a spy conflict into open confrontation, although this is not a very plausible scenario given their shared interests.

4 Somalia

Like Eritrea and Djibouti, Somalia also enjoys a highly significant geostrategic position, or even more so, due to the length of its coastline—the longest on the African mainland (over 3,000 km)—and its dual access to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

It continues to be regarded as one of the world's most fragile states (The Fund for Peace, 2024). Despite this, the country has shifted from being perceived solely as a hotbed of piracy and terrorism to becoming a political marketplace where sovereignty is auctioned off (De Waal, 2014) and the capacity of the major powers to rebuild—or act as guardians of—a state for their own benefit is measured.

Unlike Djibouti, a small but stable country, and Eritrea, an authoritarian but centralised state, Somalia has endured decades of state fragmentation and has long been regarded as the epitome of a failed state. This facilitated, and continues to facilitate, phenomena such as piracy or the presence of armed groups such as Al-Shabaab or the ISIS affiliate known as Islamic State – East Africa Province (IS-CAP), amongst others.

Its institutional weakness has turned Somalia into a geopolitical space open to indirect competition between powers such as China or the United States, Ethiopia and Egypt, or the United Arab Emirates versus Qatar and Turkey. The paradox lies in the profitability of the situation, given that its weakness is its greatest asset for external powers. Recently, a disruptive action has polarised the various presences and alliances in the country, as will be seen below.

On 26 December 2025, Israel officially recognised the Republic of Somaliland as an independent and sovereign state (Chome, 2026), with the aim of thereby gaining a foothold against the Houthis. This diplomatic formality has sent shockwaves through alliances in Somalia, and in the Horn of Africa in general, because the underlying concern is the future of the security architecture in the Red Sea.

In response to Israel's actions, two blocs have emerged in the Red Sea, reminiscent of the Cold War. The defenders of Somali unity: Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and the axis supporting the autonomous regions, led by Israel and the United Arab Emirates. China, the United States and the EU maintain positions based on preserving the international *status quo*, albeit with strategic nuances that bring them closer to the Mogadishu bloc insofar as they advocate respect for territorial integrity.

4.1 United Arab Emirates

In January 2026, the Somali Government annulled all agreements it had with the United Arab Emirates, citing Emirati actions deemed 'detrimental to the country's sovereignty, national unity and political independence' (Al Mayadeen Español, 2026). Abu Dhabi's support for Israel's backing of Somaliland's independence was a decisive factor in this expulsion (EFE, 2026a). Nevertheless, the United Arab Emirates continues to maintain a presence in the Somali autonomous regions of Somaliland, Puntland and Jubaland, and specifically in the ports of Berbera and Bosaso (Mohamed, 2026). There, the central government has little presence, although it does control the airspace and could take drastic expulsion measures. In any case, there is no indication that relations between the two countries will improve in the short or medium term.

Somalia has responded by seeking support from Turkey and Saudi Arabia, recently (February 2026) signing new military cooperation agreements to counter Israeli 'interference' in what they consider their national territory (Al Jazeera, 2026).

4.2 Turkey

Turkey's dominant presence in Somalia is the result of a decade of incremental steps that accelerated in 2024. In February of that year, Ankara signed an agreement (Agenzia Nova, 2024b) whereby Mogadishu granted it defence authority and exploitation

rights over its waters for ten years. Somalia's ultimate aim is to curb any potential move by Ethiopia regarding its ambitions for access to the sea, given that, in January, it had signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Somaliland in which it would recognise it as an independent country in exchange for a port.

Turkey is responsible for security along the entire Somali coastline, including that of Somaliland, although this responsibility is not exercised *in practice*, as the region has its own agreements with Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates.

Pragmatism and, more recently, Turkey's military muscle in Mogadishu demonstrate that the Western presence, based on conditional development aid, is no longer the only option—nor the most attractive one—for African governments (Mesa, 2024).

Turkey controls the country's logistics hubs. The Somali capital is home to Turkey's largest base outside its borders: Turksom. From there, it controls maritime routes and protects Somalia's waters (Ibáñez, 2024). It also manages Mogadishu's international airport and port. Finally, by the end of 2025, Turkey had planned to complete its rocket launch site in Somalia (EFE, 2023), but that milestone has been delayed.

In return, Ankara has negotiated a dominant stake in future offshore hydrocarbon exploration and production in Somalia (Kimani, 2026), trains part of the Somali army and promotes the sale of its own military equipment (*hard power*). As part of the soft power exercised by Turkey, it is worth noting that a significant proportion of the Somali army already speaks Turkish (Kasapoglu, 2020). Along the same lines, it is also gaining influence through its aid, such as the construction of hospitals and schools.

In Somalia, Turkey has executed a textbook example of what political scientist Joseph Nye termed '*smart power*': the strategic blend of military force with cultural and economic appeal; hard power combined with soft power. Part of the latter involves ensuring that its presence is not perceived as an occupation, but rather as a necessary partnership.

4.3 Saudi Arabia

Before Israel's recognition of Somaliland, Riyadh's primary concern was to prevent non-Arab powers or rivals, such as Iran or

even Turkey, from controlling both sides of the Red Sea. In the context of 2026, Turkey and the Saudis have become partners of convenience. Riyadh prefers Turkey to Israeli or Ethiopian influence in the region. Its presence was primarily economic and diplomatic (Vertin, 2019) in areas of soft power.

Israeli recognition has, among many other things, altered that trend. An example of this shift is the signing, in February 2026, of a military cooperation agreement between Saudi Arabia and Somalia (Shabelle Media Network, 2026). This agreement came immediately after Somalia severed its security agreements with the UAE.

Despite the aforementioned military cooperation agreement, Saudi Arabia's role is that of a financial and diplomatic partner in areas of hard power. It is Turkey that exercises direct military power.

As seen above, by early 2026 Turkey had established itself as the sole operational military guarantor of Somalia's territorial integrity. Turkey provides the F-16 fighter jets, the boots on the ground and the naval vessels; Saudi Arabia provides the regional legitimacy and the resources necessary to prevent the Somali state from collapsing.

4.4 Qatar

By February 2026, Qatar's presence in Somalia had intensified significantly, becoming a pillar of the new 'Arab security umbrella' supporting the federal government in Mogadishu (Islam Times, 2026).

On 19 January 2026, Qatar and Somalia signed a defence cooperation agreement in Doha (Mobio, 2026). This pact also seeks to fill the void left by the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Qatar, like Saudi Arabia, also acts in close coordination with Turkey. Thus, whilst Turkey provides direct military muscle (such as the deployment of F-16 fighter jets), Doha provides the financial and diplomatic backing necessary to sustain the federal government's institutions. The funding sectors of Qatar and Saudi Arabia are not the same. Qatar has been a loyal and constant ally of the current administration and focuses on intelligence, funding and training for the civilian administration. For its part, Saudi Arabia has recently joined in the support and focuses on the defence budget.

4.5 Egypt

In February 2026, following the withdrawal of Emirati troops from Somalia, Egypt completed the deployment there of ten thousand troops, helicopters and drones (Asem, 2024). Egypt has established itself as Somalia's most important land-based military ally, forming, alongside Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the bloc defending the country's unity against Israel's recognition of Somaliland.

Egypt had already begun a significant military deployment in August 2024 (Sadek, 2024), driven primarily by its rivalry with Ethiopia and, in particular, following the signing of the memorandum with Somaliland.

When Israel recognised Somaliland in December 2025, Egypt already had an established military infrastructure and a legal and diplomatic framework in Somalia. Israel's announcement prompted Egypt to accelerate and expand its military objectives (Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2024).

For Egypt, Somalia is a key theatre for its own security, as it relies on Mogadishu in its disputes with Ethiopia over Nile water (Palacián de Inza, 2025). Egypt's approach towards Ethiopia is indirect: by supporting Somalia and its unity, it prevents Addis Ababa from gaining access to the sea via Somaliland.

4.6 China

Like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, China supports the unity of Somalia. Similarly, Somalia adheres to 'the One-China principle' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2026). The difference lies in the fact that Beijing does not support Mogadishu through a military deployment, but rather through high-level diplomacy within the UN Security Council (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2026), for example, and, following its model of infrastructure diplomacy, through infrastructure development: port modernisation (New Mogadishu Development Corporation, n.d.) and investment in renewable energy, agriculture and fisheries (Jain, 2025).

China competes directly with the Turkish companies that manage the port of Mogadishu, and is therefore seeking business in secondary ports such as Kismayo.

4.7 USA

The US remains, by far, the largest donor of humanitarian aid to Somalia (OCHA Services, 2024). This leading position responds to several strategic needs: acting as a shield against Al-Shabaab, facilitating greater acceptance of the US presence among the population, gaining access to the Red Sea, and helping to contain Chinese influence (US Congress, 2025).

In 2026, the US maintains air superiority through drone operations and the training of the elite Somali Danab brigade, but has lost its monopoly on political and economic clout in the face of Egypt's military might and China's financial power.

In February 2026 (Office of Inspector General, 2025), new funds were announced for the stabilisation of areas recently liberated from Al-Shabaab, possibly seeking to prevent China or Gulf actors (such as Saudi Arabia) from monopolising civilian reconstruction. There is also competition with Turkey, albeit on another front: Turkish drones now operate in the same airspace as those from the US. Furthermore, Somali intelligence no longer relies solely on American satellites, and this represents a critical loss of control for the US.

Currently, the US is just another player in the military sphere, seeking to remain vigilant so as not to lose further influence, although decisions to cut aid could prove costly.

4.8 EU

The European Union's presence in Somalia is almost exclusively operational and technical. This takes the form of its on-the-ground missions, which have been extended until 2027 (Inforpuertos, 2025). These missions are (Ministry of Defence, n.d.): EUTM Somalia, focused on training the Somali National Army (SNA); EUCAP Somalia, a civilian mission advising the police and coast-guards; and Operation Atalanta, often led by Spain, which patrols the Somali coastline, protecting World Food Programme ships and monitoring traffic in the Red Sea.

Furthermore, although it is an African Union mission, with the transition from ATMIS (African Union Transition Mission in Somalia) to the new AUSSOM (African Union Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia), the EU remains the main contributor to the salaries of the soldiers participating in it.

In the same vein, the European Union is the largest investor in certain sectors of Somalia's state infrastructure, such as judicial reform, food security projects and health infrastructure, amongst others (European Commission, n.d.).

The US and the EU no longer dictate policy in Mogadishu; their involvement focuses on the financial underpinning of the security architecture, aimed at preventing a systemic crisis that could lead to large-scale irregular migration flows.

Somalia has gone from being a failed state to a multipolar chessboard. By 2026, Mogadishu has demonstrated an unexpected mastery in leasing different aspects of its sovereignty to various powers: the skies to Turkey and the US, the land to Egypt, the trade routes to China, and the financial lifeline to the Gulf (Saudi Arabia and Qatar). The EU, for its part, is relegated to the role of regulatory patron, funding the bureaucracy of a stability now enforced by others using far more direct methods. The result is a country which, although mortgaged, is today more difficult to invade or fragment than it was a decade ago

5 Ethiopia

Ethiopia is the demographic and political heart of the Horn of Africa. It is the second most populous country on the continent (United Nations, n.d.) and the seat of the African Union. With Eritrea's independence in 1993, Ethiopia went from being a coastal power to becoming the world's most populous landlocked country. Its lack of access to the sea defines and shapes much of its aggressive foreign policy, which may also be a manoeuvre aimed at uniting a country riven by deep divisions (Palacián de Inza, 2024).

Whilst it is true that internal difficulties are overshadowed by external ambitions, it is also true that Ethiopia feels encircled: it has Egypt to the north and now Egypt to the south (ten thousand Egyptian soldiers in Somalia). The memorandum of understanding signed with Somaliland is its way of breaking that encirclement⁴. Its lack of a coastline not only 'mediates' its politics, but also its economy, given that 95% of its trade passes through a single point worth between 1.5 and 2 billion dollars annually (Djibouti) (Bereketeab, 2024).

⁴ At the time of writing, 24 February 2026, the Israeli president was beginning an official visit to Ethiopia to strengthen bilateral ties (EFE, 2026b). He may be closer to breaking that siege than might be expected.

Addis Ababa has shifted from an almost exclusive dependence on the West to becoming, since the year 2000, a theatre of strategic competition where China, Russia and the United Arab Emirates play decisive roles. Its accession to the BRICS in January 2024 and the launch of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) have reaffirmed its ambition for leadership.

To understand this balance of power, it is necessary to analyse the role of the various actors operating on the Ethiopian ground: from China's investment hegemony and India's emerging commercial clout to the vital support of the European Union and the Arab axis.

5.1 China

Within this complex web of alliances, the relationship with Beijing represents the deepest and, at the same time, most controversial link in Ethiopia's strategy. China is not merely a trading ally, but a structural—and even existential—partner that has shaped the country's landscape over the past decades.

Ethiopia fell into a massive debt trap with China to build railways and dams. This generated resentment among the Ethiopian population when the projects became unaffordable. It is worth highlighting as a key example that Beijing has built the transmission lines for the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, meaning it is the entity enabling the energy to reach the cities. That is its true lever of power.

Ethiopia has been designated an 'all-weather strategic partnership' (Xinhua News Agency, 2024) by the Chinese Government. This is not merely diplomatic rhetoric, but the highest level of trust that China bestows upon its closest allies. Very few countries hold this designation.

China's presence in Ethiopia faces a paradox. The Chinese own all the concrete, but they cannot take the money home. Ethiopia suffers from a chronic shortage of foreign currency and its national bank blocks access to foreign exchange.

To avoid losing that money, China is accepting mining concessions as debt repayment (Reuters, 2025). Instead of liquidity, they take lithium and rare earths. Another way to avoid losses is reinvestment in construction. The buildings function as a store of physical value. However, as they need imported materials to complete the works—which are paid for in dollars, and the government does not provide them—, construction comes to a halt,

leaving the capital full of unfinished concrete promises. For this reason, the landscape of Addis Ababa is littered with concrete skeletons and idle cranes. Nevertheless, a new player is managing to capitalise on the situation, as will be analysed below.



Figure 4. View of central Addis Abeba. Source: Juan Pedro Hornero

5.2 United Arab Emirates

Against this backdrop of paralysis, capital from the United Arab Emirates has taken the reins, having recently made giant strides in its long-standing quest to become a major player in Ethiopia. In early February 2026, they went on the offensive, taking advantage of China's financial 'gridlock' to buy strategic assets at bargain prices. Their strategy is clear: where China provides cement and debt, the United Arab Emirates provides dollars and management.

This aggressive Emirati move is not aimed at financing the Ethiopian state, but at replacing Chinese creditors in key sectors. Abu Dhabi has realised that Addis Ababa's foreign exchange shortage is its best market opportunity, and all the more so because the UAE is not only buying assets but also injecting direct liquidity so that Ethiopia can pay for its basic imports (Enterprise AM, 2024). Despite this, China is not a player of the past: it remains the largest creditor and is the main owner of the infrastructure.

The UAE has launched a strategy of widespread engagement that can be summarised in four further points: infrastructure and logistics financing, political and diplomatic support for Addis Ababa, food security, and technological security.

With regard to infrastructure and logistics, the implementing body is one of the world's largest port management companies. Through Dubai Ports World (DP World), the United Arab Emirates not only manages the port of Berbera but is also financing the construction of the Berbera-Aysha railway (Somaliland, 2025), which will be integrated with the existing line to Addis Ababa.

The UAE *effectively* holds the keys to the sea for Ethiopia (Roca, 2024); the physical key, as we have just seen, but also the diplomatic one. Through the operator DP World, the United Arab Emirates not only controls and modernises the port of Berbera in Somaliland, but, according to Omar Mahmoud of the International Crisis Group (Mohamed, 2026), for Somalia it has been the true guarantor of the controversial memorandum signed in 2024 (Gebru, 2025).

For Addis Ababa, Berbera is not only a logistical alternative to Djibouti (offering advantages in terms of cost [Seid, 2025] and efficiency), but also the culmination of its national ambition to regain access to the Red Sea. The UAE provides a degree of buffer security against Addis Ababa's fear that the pact with Somaliland will continue to be viewed as a violation of Somalia's sovereignty (Palacián de Inza, 2024).

This is the United Arab Emirates' masterstroke in 2026, given that China relies on the port of Djibouti, but the UAE controls Berbera. By facilitating the pact between Ethiopia and Somaliland so that Addis Ababa has its own access to the sea, the UAE has become the 'indispensable partner' offering Ethiopia what it desires most: to break its geographical isolation.

Emirati influence extends beyond logistics to encompass strategic security. Emirati funds are acquiring vast tracts of fertile land to grow wheat and commodities destined directly for the Gulf. Unlike many Chinese projects, the UAE utilises Ethiopian labour and part of the harvest is allocated to the domestic market, whilst also securing its own consumption.

The UAE has established itself as Ethiopia's defence technology partner (Al Jazeera, 2021), enabling the Ethiopian Air Force to manufacture three hundred drones in just three months (Fortune, 2025). Furthermore, at the African Union summit in

February 2026, the UAE announced a USD 1 billion investment in artificial intelligence infrastructure for Africa (Agenzia Nova, 2025), with Ethiopia serving as the logistics hub.

In short, the rise of the UAE has transformed Ethiopia's vulnerability into an opportunity for absolute control. By simultaneously managing the flow of foreign currency, the regime's security and the long-sought access to the Red Sea, Abu Dhabi has gone from being a financial ally to becoming the external manager of the Ethiopian state's viability.

It is not all advantages. Ethiopia is swapping a Chinese debt trap for an Emirati infrastructure trap. If Addis Ababa falls out with Abu Dhabi, not only will it owe money, but it will also physically lose its access to the sea and its food security. Furthermore, even without this happening, its ambitions in Somaliland alone put it in direct rivalry with Egypt.

The UAE's influence and presence in Africa is two-sided: development coexists with land grabbing and accusations of neo-colonialism and human rights abuses (Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain, 2024).

5.3 USA

For the United States, Ethiopia's stability is a matter of national security (Getachew, 2026) in the Horn of Africa. Despite this, Washington is currently struggling not to be sidelined. Ethiopia's entry into the BRICS broke US financial exclusivity, allowing Addis Ababa to use the New Development Bank to sidestep pressure from the IMF and the World Bank.

This autonomy creates a strategic inconsistency that irritates Congress: the US sends billions in humanitarian aid to a 'partner' that votes with Moscow and Beijing (Everett, 2024).

Under the 2026 National Defence Strategy (NDS), the US has adopted a 'cautious realism'. As Suliman (2026) analyses, Washington no longer acts as a guardian, but as a spectator that delegates internal management to Addis Ababa to prevent the country from collapsing or falling entirely under China's control. This strategic inconsistency allows Addis Ababa to use US aid to sustain itself—it is the African country that receives the most money from USAID (Agbetiloye, 2025)—whilst fully integrating into the BRICS, challenging the hegemony of the dollar.

5.4 Turkey

Turkey maintains a strategic relationship with Ethiopia, establishing itself as its second-largest foreign investor after China, with direct investment of around USD 2.5 billion in sectors such as manufacturing and construction (U.S. Department of State, 2025). Ankara acts as a comprehensive partner, as it not only provides funding, but also transfers its industry and military technology (Kemal, 2026).

In the military sphere, Ankara has been a key ally to Abiy Ahmed's Government. The supply of Bayraktar TB2 and Akinci drones was crucial in quelling the insurgency in Tigray. In 2026, this relationship evolved into a Defence Cooperation Pact, which includes training and a steady supply of weaponry.

Regarding infrastructure, the Turkish company Yapı Merkezi led the Awash-Woldia railway project. Ethiopia has divided its railway network among three powers to avoid a monopoly by a single nation: China controls the central corridor to Djibouti, the United Arab Emirates is funding the future corridor to Berbera, and Turkey controls the northern one (Chen, 2021). This line is key to connecting the northern textile industry with the main network leading to the sea.

Finally, Turkey employs soft power: it funds hospitals and educational centres and restores historic mosques such as Al-Nejashi, thereby connecting with Ethiopia's large Muslim population. This balanced position, coupled with its investments in both countries, allows Turkey to act as a mediator in the Nile conflict (GERD) and in the Ethiopia-Somalia dispute following the memorandum with Somaliland. Ankara seeks stability to protect its economic interests.

5.5 EU

The European Union is now a secondary player in Ethiopia. Its influence has shifted from being political to almost purely aid-based. This is due, on the one hand, to the fact that the EU can no longer compete in terms of speed or volume. Whilst the UAE provides USD 3 billion for a railway within months (Abdullahi, 2025), the EU takes years to approve aid packages of USD 600 million, subject to bureaucracy and reforms.

On the other hand, as an actor that demands respect for human rights and accountability in order to release funds, it is not the

partner of choice for major strategic projects. Abiy Ahmed prefers the 'non-interference' of the BRICS, of which he is, moreover, already a member, or Emirati pragmatism.

Furthermore, for Addis Ababa, the EU is the entity one turns to for rebuilding clinics and schools after the war, but not for building the country's economic future. It is seen as a sort of giant NGO, not as a powerful partner.

In short, by 2026 the EU will be limited to managing the consequences of instability (migration and hunger) whilst watching from the sidelines as the powers of the Global South (the UAE, Turkey, China and India) divide up the real assets and control of trade routes.

5.6 Russia

Russia's influence in Ethiopia has grown following Ethiopia's accession to the BRICS. Its current strategy is based on three disruptive pillars that directly challenge Western influence: it offers civil nuclear technology, weapons and a protective veto in the UN Security Council. In this way, Moscow has positioned itself as the 'guarantor of technological and defence sovereignty' (Dezhina, 2024).

Russia is becoming a sort of bodyguard, offering Ethiopia the tools to become an independent regional power: nuclear energy, attack drones and an alternative financial system to the dollar within the BRICS framework. For Russia, Ethiopia is its gateway to counterbalancing Western power in the Horn of Africa (Samyuktha, 2025).

Examples of Russia's growing influence include the signing of agreements between Ethiopia and Russia to build a Russian-designed nuclear power plant on Ethiopian territory (ROSATOM, 2025), as well as the increase in sales of heavy weaponry (Kyrychevskiy, 2026), fighter jets and, more recently, Su-30 aircraft.

5.7 Saudi Arabia

It maintains a silent rivalry with the United Arab Emirates over influence in the country. Riyadh has positioned itself as a key partner in agriculture and food security, seeking to secure supplies for the kingdom via Ethiopian land. In February 2026, both countries launched a business council to boost their bilateral trade, which already exceeds USD 1 billion (Hailegorgis, 2026).

5.8 India

New Delhi is a silent giant. Its presence is less noticeable than that of the UAE or China, but much more deeply embedded in the fabric of everyday economic life and in education.

It is Ethiopia's second-largest trading partner and third-largest investor, controlling a large share of private investment in the textile sector and industrial parks. Plastics, agriculture and the pharmaceutical sector are other areas where New Delhi has a strong presence (Rani Anand, 2025), using both the Indian rupee and the Ethiopian birr for trade.

Furthermore, India also wields soft power through education, being the leading partner in training in Ethiopia, having educated a large proportion of the country's technical and bureaucratic elite.

Addis Ababa uses India to avoid total dependence on China. Delhi, for its part, sees Ethiopia as its gateway to the African market through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement (ICEX, n.d.), using Indian factories in Ethiopia to produce and sell goods tariff-free across the entire continent.

Like the other countries in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia does not choose one bloc over another, but instead pursues a pragmatic balance by seeking breathing space within a multipolar world: it prioritises the BRICS members to accelerate its structural growth and ensure its defence without interference. At the same time, it maintains the US and the EU as indispensable partners for humanitarian aid and diplomatic balance. In the face of the coldness of Chinese assets⁵, the incursion of Turkey and the UAE is gaining ground by combining security, identity and governance.

6 Conclusions

The international order in this region has been transformed into a marketplace of transactional interests, where geography is the supreme asset and ideology has no place.

The Horn of Africa has ceased to be a forgotten periphery and has become the epicentre of a new multipolar paradigm. It is the laboratory of a post-Western order. The region is not merely a chessboard on which the great powers play, but a space where

⁵ The author's experience in Ethiopia is that the word 'Chinese' is used as a hate-filled insult directed at Westerners in Addis Ababa.

African states themselves have learnt to manage external competition to ensure their survival and development.

From the geographical lease of Eritrea to the paradox of stability in Djibouti, each country has devised a strategy that avoids the exclusivity of a single bloc: China is sought for concrete, Russia and Turkey for weapons, and the Gulf monarchies for the life-blood of their petrodollars, food security and control of logistics hubs. The West is relegated to providing humanitarian life support and maintaining diplomatic balance. However, this balancing act is fragile. Overwhelming external debt and the militarisation of the coastline threaten to transform regional autonomy into a form of supervised sovereignty.

The era of closed blocs and exclusive alliances is over. The future belongs to those who know how to manage their ambiguity. The great competitive advantage of powers such as China, Russia or Turkey is clear: offering unconditional sovereignty, filling the void left by the failure of the Western paradigm.

Whilst Western powers retreat in the face of the failure of their rhetoric and regional actors in the Gulf or Turkey adjust their strategies according to the political climate, China stands as the sole actor with a commitment to absolute permanence. In this marketplace of interests, some will come and go in search of expedient agreements, but the region's underlying structure already belongs to those who hold the debt and the concrete, ensuring that, come what may, China will remain.

Ultimately, at the time of writing, the war waged by Israel and the United States against Iran is casting a shadow of systemic uncertainty that threatens to drive up regional logistics costs and erode the profitability of the Horn of Africa—a burden that only major liquidity managers will be able to bear.

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Chapter Three

Hydrocracy in the Horn

José Martín Martín

Abstract

The Horn of Africa is located next to one of the most important maritime corridors in the world: the Red Sea. Large volumes of goods, containers, and hydrocarbons transit through it, as well as data through submarine cables, supplying global markets and enabling the connection between three continents.

Almost all the countries in the Horn are coastal along this crucial route, with the exception of the largest among them: Ethiopia. Access to the sea has become a matter of survival for the world's most populous landlocked state, as the lack of it hampers its growth. But its search for an outlet to maritime waters has generated suspicion and concern among all its neighbours.

Conversely, Ethiopia is the country best endowed with water resources in the region, allowing it to influence and negotiate from a position of strength with its neighbours. The exploitation of this hydropower potential through the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, on the Blue Nile, has added Egypt to the list of actors aggrieved by Addis Ababa.

Finally, the privileged position of the Horn has drawn the attention of the Persian Gulf monarchies, among other countries, involving themselves in regional affairs to such an extent that it is no longer possible to consider the Horn states in isolation to fully understand their dynamics.

Keywords

Red Sea, Water, Resources, Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Ports.

1 The Horn today; an island tomorrow

The Horn of Africa is situated, for the most part, within the Great Rift Valley. This geographical feature, the cradle of humanity¹ and one of Africa's ecologically richest regions, runs through East Africa from north to south for some 5,000 kilometres and is the visible consequence of a fault that is gradually splitting the continent in two.

But this tectonic movement, much to the disappointment of the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, will not succeed in carving out the Horn's insular shape for another ten million years or so, give or take an eon.

In the meantime, the Rift will remain a geological whim and a distant certainty, and the region's strongmen will have to continue their relentless game of Go² around the Red Sea.

2 The cornucopia: why it matters

Strictly speaking, the region known as the Horn of Africa comprises the following countries: Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia. In Tel Aviv, they would add Somaliland³, and such an addition would most likely have the approval of Addis Ababa and Abu Dhabi; at least *in pectore*.

Looking at the map, one can see a region bordered by two bodies of water: the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. Geographical features such as the Gulf of Aden and the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb also stand out. The latter is included in the list of chokepoints: areas on the map characterised by their narrowness and by being essential for maritime traffic and logistics, as a considerable percentage of world trade passes through them.

1 The discovery of hominid fossils such as Lucy and archaeological sites such as the Olduvai Gorge and the Afar Depression, together with the wealth of information provided about our ancestors, has led to the Great Rift Valley being regarded as one of the cradles of humanity.

2 Go is a strategy board game that originated in China over 2,500 years ago. It is a two-player game in which the aim is to control more territory than one's opponent by placing black and white stones on the intersections of the board. The objective is to surround the opponent's stones in order to capture them.

3 Israel formally recognised Somaliland as an independent state on 26 December 2025, becoming the first country to take this step.



Figure 1. Physical map of the Horn of Africa. Source: commons.wikimedia.org/

This trade flow is channelled through the Red Sea, a quasi-riverine waterway whose size does not do justice to its importance. Its location is strategic, serving as the connecting point between Europe, Africa and Asia.

The figures speak for themselves: between 12% and 15% of global maritime traffic passes through its waters, along with around 12% of crude oil supplies and 8% of liquefied natural gas (LNG) (Energy Information Administration, 2026), as well as 30% of global container traffic (World Shipping Council, 2023).

It is a key route for energy transport, originating in the Persian Gulf and bound for Europe, and a vital artery for Eurasian trade, with up to 40% of all goods passing through its waters: particularly for China, the world's factory.

It also hosts twenty-one submarine cables on its seabed (Submarine Cable Map, n.d.), through which around 17% of global Internet traffic flows⁴.

Hence, states that would otherwise go unnoticed in global power struggles are courted by a host of regional and global *hegemonies*, or those aspiring to be so.

3 Ethiopia: the special case

But these waters do not lap at the shores of all the peninsular members, much to Ethiopia's misfortune and despair.

After a long war, Eritrea finally gained its independence from Ethiopia in 1993, condemning Addis Ababa to strict landlocked status.

This historic event, which the Ethiopian Prime Minister would not hesitate to describe as 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century', borrowing the now-famous phrase of one of his BRICS colleagues⁵, weighs heavily and hampers the aspirations of the region's demographic giant⁶.

Ethiopia, with a population of 140 million (World Bank Group, n.d.), and rising, is the world's most populous landlocked country. The estimate for 2050 is around 225 million people (World Health Organisation, n.d.), which explains the growing sense of claustrophobia in Addis Ababa.

There are also strategic reasons dictated by the figures: Ethiopia relies on Djibouti for 90-95% of its access to the sea for its exports, under an agreement whereby it pays its neighbour between USD 1.5 and 2 billion a year in port fees. This sum represents approximately one-third of Ethiopia's export revenue

⁴ Damage to four of these cables in 2024 disrupted 25% of Internet traffic between Europe and Asia (Gritten, 2024).

⁵ A statement made in 2005 by Russian President Vladimir Putin in his annual address to the Federal Assembly of Russia.

⁶ Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has described the loss of access to the Red Sea as a 'historic mistake'.

(Institute of Foreign Affairs, 2025); an unsustainable burden for any growth project.

Access to the sea is, therefore, the backbone of the entire foreign policy of Abiy Ahmed's Government, whether through the diversification of port access or the direct acquisition of coastal territory.

3.1 Troubled waters

This Abyssinian love of the sea has the entire neighbourhood on high alert, particularly Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti.

With regard to the first of these nations, Ethiopia's undisguised appetite for the Eritrean port of Assab, coupled with the historical reasons already mentioned, only serves to reinforce Asmara's fears. In the case of the second, it is the flirtations between Addis Ababa and the rebel Somali territory of Somaliland that are the cause of the rift.

Finally, the third fears the loss of one of the few—if not the only—advantages it possesses in the complex web of ties and dependencies with its large neighbour.

3.2 The Nobel Peace Prize

Abiy Ahmed, the current Prime Minister of Ethiopia, took office in 2018. His term began full of promise and hope following the signing of a peace agreement with Eritrea, which remains in force to this day⁷. His efforts and conciliatory stance were rewarded, a year later, with the award of the Nobel Peace Prize. However, since receiving the award, few of his cabinet's measures have been able to justify to his regional neighbours the aura of 'the person who has done the most or the best work for fraternity among nations', as the Swedish inventor's will stated.

Whilst the idyll with Eritrea was maintained during the war in the Ethiopian region of Tigray⁸—albeit out of mere mutual conve-

⁷ Following the war between 1998 and 2000 between Ethiopia and Eritrea, both countries signed a peace agreement that was never implemented. With the advent of Abiy Ahmed, the effective implementation of the treaty was agreed in 2018, finally bringing about peace.

⁸ War between the Ethiopian Central Government and the regional authorities of the Tigray region, led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The conflict lasted from 2020 to 2022, with Eritrea and the Fano militias from Ethiopia's Amhara region supporting Addis Ababa's troops. Asmara's alignment with Ethiopia was due to the

nience—, the decision to exclude Asmara from the negotiations in Pretoria⁹ in 2022 returned cross-border relations to their natural state of mutual distrust.

This provided the breeding ground for Eritrea to throw itself into the arms of Egypt and Somalia, in an entente opposed to perceived Ethiopian expansionism.

In its renewed animosity towards Ethiopia, Asmara has capitalised on Ethiopia's ethnic hornet's nest, forging closer ties with the Fano militia, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and, above all, the TPLF, proving true the adage that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'. Eritrea, which initially sought to weaken the TPLF, had no qualms about drawing closer to its long-standing Tigrayan enemy after feeling betrayed by Addis Ababa. This change of stance also demonstrates the tactical flexibility and opportunism of Isaias Afwerki¹⁰, who exploits regional conflicts and navigates through them with the primary aim of ensuring the survival of his militarised regime, as well as seeking Eritrean influence in the Horn of Africa.

These moves have provoked angry protests from Addis Ababa (Europa Press Internacional, 2025), which has also demanded the immediate withdrawal of the Eritrean contingents still present in Tigray (Europa Press Internacional, 2026a).

Nor has Ethiopia stood idly by; it too has exploited the region's ethnic mosaic for its own ends.

This is the case of the Afar people, who were divided between Eritrea, Ethiopia and Djibouti when, in colonial times, the respective borders were drawn arbitrarily.

Addis Ababa is exploiting long-standing grievances and political marginalisation to put pressure on Asmara in its quest for access to the sea. Ethiopia, which presents itself as the champion of the rights of the oppressed Afar people of Eritrea, supports armed opposition groups from this ethnic group who, based on Ethiopian

historical rivalry between Eritrea and the TPLF, as this Tigrayan movement led the Ethiopian Government during the 1998-2000 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

⁹ The peace negotiations involved only Ethiopia and the TPLF, leaving out Eritrea and the Fano militias of Amhara. This is the main reason for the deterioration in relations between Addis Ababa and Asmara, as well as for the Fano uprising in Amhara. Furthermore, Eritrea has not yet vacated some of the positions it occupied in Tigray during the war.

¹⁰ The President of Eritrea since independence in 1993.

territory, attack targets on the Eritrean coast, particularly around the port of Assab (Ismail, 2025).

But Ethiopia must exercise caution in stoking Afar nationalism for two main reasons.

The first is that Djibouti is also home to an Afar community, which, moreover, is at odds with the Somali Issa who have held power since independence. As already explained, the small coastal country is the point of departure for between 90% and 95% of Ethiopian exports, so creating internal instability in Djibouti would be detrimental to Addis Ababa's own interests.

Secondly, part of the Afar community is based in Ethiopia. There too, they are excluded from the levers of power in the central government and, against a backdrop of internal instability and ethnic violence, Ethiopia's support for Afar irredentism could end up backfiring.

The deterioration of relations between Addis Ababa and Asmara has led Ethiopia to deploy a large number of federal troops to the north during the first weeks of 2026 (Marks, 2026). Indeed, the first skirmishes and drone attacks took place in the Tigray region in late January (Addis Standard, 2026), raising fears that an imminent conflict may erupt once again in the region. The build-up of troops on the border with Tigray has been at the expense of existing deployments to deal with ethnic uprisings, primarily among the Amhara and Oromo. The Fano militia is already capitalising on this movement of federal troops, seizing villages and expanding the territory under its control. But this temporary sacrifice of a pawn could yield long-term benefits for Addis Ababa if it manages to crush, or sufficiently weaken, the persistent threat posed by the TPLF in the north. This hypothetical outcome would also allow the Ethiopian Army to be stationed along the entire border with Eritrea, and not just in the narrow strip of the Afar region, as has been the case until now. Furthermore, by eliminating a powerful enemy in its rear, it could concentrate more resources against its northern neighbour. This scenario appears threatening and intolerable to Asmara, so one might expect that, should an open war break out in Tigray, it would make its resources available to the TPLF or even intervene directly.

But this time, given the current state of interests, alliances and security agreements in the region, there is a possibility that it could end up involving more actors than in the previous war in

Tigray—which already claimed the lives of some 600,000 people—and so, in that case, the bloodshed could be even greater.

The first country to be affected would likely be Egypt: a hypothetical federal victory in Tigray, followed by a deployment along the entire shared border, would give Ethiopia the ability to directly threaten the coveted Eritrean ports of Massawa and, in particular, Assab¹¹. The idea of Addis Ababa gaining access to the Red Sea is taboo in Cairo and, for that reason, some form of Egyptian assistance to Asmara would come as no surprise. Nor would an Egyptian attack on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) be out of the question. Meanwhile, Egypt and Eritrea have strengthened their security and strategic cooperation ties by signing an agreement under which Cairo will invest in the port of Assab in exchange for naval access (Addis Standard, 2025).

Another actor that could be drawn into the conflict is Sudan. The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) enjoy the firm backing of Egypt in their power struggle with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)¹². In turn, the Sudanese Armed Forces have a long history of collaboration with the TPLF, having provided logistical support and allowed the use of Sudanese territory as a refuge, where they have also established training bases—the TPLF has also fought alongside the SAF against the RSF. Added to this are the tensions over the GERD, as Khartoum too is at the mercy of Addis Ababa's whims regarding the flow of water in the Blue Nile, plus the clashes over the fertile agricultural lands of the al-Fashaga region, from where Amhara farmers were evicted in 2020 by the Sudanese Army¹³. Ethiopia, for its part, supports the RSF, even hosting a training camp for Sudanese paramilitaries on its territory (Paravicini and Levinson, 2026), which consequently makes it a participant in

¹¹ Both Abiy and a senior official from the Ministry of Defence have openly expressed their ambition regarding Assab, with the former declaring that it is 'only a matter of time' before Ethiopia regains access to this port and the latter asserting Ethiopia's 'historical right' to Assab. Although it prefers to achieve this through diplomatic channels, Ethiopia has not completely ruled out the use of force to gain access to the sea.

¹² Despite collaborating in the overthrow of Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir, the head of the Army, Abdelfatah al-Burhan, and the head of the RSF, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo—alias Hemedti—began a power struggle that led to the current civil war in 2023.

¹³ The fertile territory of al-Fashaga, which borders western Tigray, is claimed by both Ethiopia and Sudan. Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) troops occupied the territory in late 2020, taking advantage of the fact that Ethiopian federal and Amhara forces were engaged in the conflict in Tigray. Sudan quickly recaptured almost the entire al-Fashaga area with little fighting, displacing thousands of Ethiopian farmers, mostly of Amhara ethnicity.

Sudan's civil war. As is the United Arab Emirates: Abu Dhabi is the main backer of the RSF, as well as of Abiy Ahmed's Government—there is speculation that it is the financier of the Sudanese camp in Ethiopia—, forming a triangle of interests that extends to other parts of the Horn and which, quite possibly, would also drag the wealthy Gulf state into the Ethiopian conflict.

The United Arab Emirates' involvement, however, would not be direct, but rather in a supporting or proxy capacity, as is already the case in other scenarios. Israel would also, in all likelihood, be involved in a supporting or *proxy* capacity on Addis Ababa's side; just as Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent Turkey¹⁴, and Somalia, could do so on the Eritrean side.

Thus, although the high costs involved would be difficult to bear for any of the parties directly involved, the drums of war are beating once again in the Horn of Africa.

3.3 Berbera: a safety valve

In the case of Somalia, it was the memorandum of understanding between Ethiopia and Somaliland¹⁵ in January 2024 that soured bilateral relations.

Somalia viewed the agreement as an attack on its sovereignty, demanded the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from the mission assisting Mogadishu against al-Shabaab, expelled the Ethiopian ambassador and closed the Ethiopian consulates in northern Somalia; it even threatened war to defend its territorial integrity.

In light of this situation, Turkey emerged as a key player, with a say in matters concerning the Horn of Africa: it acted as a mediator in the dispute between Ethiopia and Somalia and helped to restore their bilateral relations, allowing for a relative return to normality.

For Ankara, Somalia's main pillar of support in the field of security and defence, there was much at stake: Mogadishu is home to its largest overseas military base and its outpost in the Indian

¹⁴ Turkish involvement would likely be contingent on that of Israel and vice versa, given the growing rivalry between the two states.

¹⁵ According to the memorandum, Somaliland would lease the port of Berbera to Ethiopia for fifty years, as well as granting it 20 km² of coastal land for the establishment of a military base. In return, Addis Ababa undertook to consider recognising Somaliland's independence in the future, alongside other financial provisions.

Ocean¹⁶. Furthermore, it supplies weapons and trains Somali troops in their fight against the terrorist group al-Shabaab. Thus, Turkey has long presented itself as the guarantor of Somalia's sovereignty and independence.

But Ethiopia is also an important partner for the Turks in the Horn of Africa¹⁷, which is why Erdogan¹⁸ had to employ his most refined diplomacy.

Consequently, through the Ankara Declaration, Addis Ababa and Mogadishu agreed to respect each other's territorial integrity and to seek trade arrangements to enable Ethiopia to gain access to the sea, albeit always under Somalia's sovereignty¹⁹.

Meanwhile, although the clauses of the memorandum have not yet been implemented, Hargeisa²⁰ insists that the treaty remains in force. Nor has Ethiopia announced that it has lapsed, meaning the Ethiopian Government is keeping a trump card to play should the move in Assab fail to yield the desired result or depending on how other events in the Horn unfold.

Cairo's stance stood in stark contrast to Turkey's restraint: already riled by previous Ethiopian manoeuvres, Egypt was quick to come to Somalia's aid (Europa Press Internacional, 2024). From the outset, it expressed its outright rejection of the memorandum, which it branded as interference in Somalia's internal affairs. Subsequently, both countries signed a strategic defence cooperation agreement, thus beginning to forge a front in the region opposed to Addis Ababa's ambitions (Holleis, 2026) which, as already explained, also includes Eritrea.

It now remains to be seen how the Ethiopian Government will react to Israel's recognition of Somaliland: if it opts for a policy of *fait accompli* and follows Tel Aviv's lead, it will force Mogadishu to take a definitive stance against Ethiopia; conversely, if it opts for appeasement and for honouring the promises made to Somalia

¹⁶ The TURKSOM base.

¹⁷ Turkey supplies Addis Ababa with Bayraktar drones, which played a key role in the previous war in Tigray and against the militias. Furthermore, it is the second-largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Ethiopia, behind only China.

¹⁸ Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

¹⁹ The agreement envisaged offering Ethiopia access to the sea via southern Somalia, but practical and security obstacles—the presence of al-Shabaab—have rendered this option unfeasible.

²⁰ Capital of Somaliland.

and Turkey, it will bolster Ethiopia's image as a responsible actor committed to international law.

However, at a time when the guns are on the verge of speaking out again on its northern border and with ethnic insurgencies gnawing at its heart, non-recognition might stem more from a desire not to open another front in the south and not to upset Erdogan than from a desire to show deference to Somalia.

3.4 The port for all

Geographically speaking, Djibouti is to Africa what Singapore is to Asia: the hub of maritime communications through a strategic passage. Its small size is offset by such a privileged location that it has the unique distinction of hosting military bases for up to five different countries: France, Italy, Japan, China and the United States, in addition to the presence of other nations.

In Ethiopia's eyes, Djibouti is, at once, its salvation and its downfall: through the port of Doraleh, it can export its goods by sea, though the cost of the port fees, being too burdensome for the Ethiopian treasury, makes it unsustainable to rely on a single port.

As previously explained, the agreement channels between USB 1.5 and 2 billion annually from the Ethiopian treasury to the coastal republic, heightening Addis Ababa's need to find other ways to diversify its access to the sea.

But what at first glance appears to be an unequal relationship of dependence of the larger country on the smaller one conceals a greater symmetry than anticipated. Firstly, due to the acute water shortage on its territory, Djibouti is forced to import this vital resource from Ethiopia via a pipeline financed by China²¹. To meet its needs, the country requires more than 100,000 m³ daily, but the supply is frequently interrupted due to power cuts (Ahmed, 2021). Secondly, it is also a net importer of energy and is connected to Ethiopia's electricity grid, from which it obtains approximately 70% of its requirements (EU-Africa Chamber of Commerce, 2025).

²¹ China is also Djibouti's main bilateral creditor. It is estimated that approximately half of Djibouti's total external debt is held by Chinese entities. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, most of the loans have financed key infrastructure projects for the African country, such as the railway to Addis Ababa, ports, logistics hubs and energy infrastructure.

Then there is the port. Ethiopian fees for the use of Doraleh account for around a third of Djibouti's gross domestic product, so Addis Ababa's search for alternative ports is a source of deep concern for its small neighbour. This explains the Djiboutian Government's offer to Ethiopia of joint administration of the port of Tadjoura (Maruf, 2024).

The high degree of interdependence between the two neighbours places Djibouti in a delicate situation: although it depends on Addis Ababa for its very survival, the threat that Ethiopian revisionism poses to its interests forces it to align itself with states wary of Ethiopia, such as Egypt (Hiiran Online, 2025).

4 Rivers of power

In the Horn of Africa, water resources are not merely a productive input: they constitute a structural element of state power. Water determines agricultural production, access to hydroelectric power, the survival of pastoral communities and the ability of states to project regional influence. In turn, the transboundary nature of the major river systems transcends internal dynamics and links them to broader regional rivalries.

Ethiopia is home to the region's main water sources thanks to its central highlands, which act as a 'water tower' for North-East Africa. Major rivers that flow into neighbouring countries originate in its mountains. The most significant system is that of the Blue Nile, the main tributary of the Nile, which rises in Lake Tana, in Ethiopia. Its Ethiopian origin makes Addis Ababa the key hydro-political actor in the Horn. Furthermore, the Juba and Shebelle rivers, which also arise in Ethiopian territory, flow into Somalia and form the basis of Somali agriculture²², giving Ethiopia leverage over its neighbour's economy and, consequently, its politics, security and stability.

Djibouti lacks major permanent river systems and, although it obtains some of its water from underground aquifers and desalination, this supply is insufficient (Asakura *et al.*, 2023), leaving it heavily dependent on imports from Ethiopia, as already explained.

²² The plains of both rivers form Somalia's breadbasket, supporting the production of maize, sesame, fruit, vegetables, sugar cane and rice. For further information, see: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (n.d.). The Juba and Shabelle Rivers and Their Importance to Somalia [online] FAO. [Accessed: 2026]. Available at: <https://faoswalim.org/article/juba-and-shabelle-rivers-and-their-importance-somalia>

Eritrea, for its part, is situated in an arid region where droughts have been frequent, and is characterised by seasonal rivers and highly variable rainfall. As a result, aquifers are the main source of fresh water, although they are under pressure due to overexploitation.

As in any part of the world, water security is closely linked to food security, but in the case of Somalia this dependence is particularly acute: over 60% of the population depends directly or indirectly on agriculture and pastoralism. Recurring droughts have caused severe humanitarian crises, leading to internal displacement and dependence on international aid.

In Eritrea and Djibouti, vulnerability is even greater due to the limited availability of surface water. Although Eritrea, in particular, has significantly improved its water management model in recent decades²³, both countries suffer from structural water stress, which restricts their capacity for agricultural development and forces them to rely on food imports.

In Ethiopia, however, the situation is paradoxical: it controls several major rivers in the Horn of Africa, possesses greater water resources and exports a portion of these to its neighbours. As mentioned, it is regarded as the region's water tower. However, these resources are unevenly distributed, and demographic pressure and agricultural expansion have generated internal tensions. Ethiopia is one of Africa's fastest-growing economies and the continent's second most populous country, so without proper water management, tensions may be exacerbated.

Yet geography has also been kind to Ethiopia, despite its lack of a coastline: its aforementioned highlands grant it one of the greatest hydroelectric potentials in Africa, as well as a tool for regional influence; consequently, the construction of dams on the rivers that originate there becomes the logical national strategy. A strategy, however, not without risks.

5 Water is the source of all things

As if to confirm the thesis of Thales of Miletus, many of the animosities in the Horn of Africa have their roots in water. The Grand

²³ In 1991, only 13% of the population had access to drinking water, compared to 85% today (Amahazion, 2025).

Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, begun in 2011 and officially inaugurated in September 2025, is one example.

The dam is situated on the Blue Nile, in the Ethiopian region of Benishangul-Gumuz, on the border with Sudan. This river, which rises in Ethiopia and accounts for up to 85% of the Nile's flow, is one of its two tributaries. Sudan and, in particular, Egypt, which are critically dependent on the waters of the Nile for their survival, have expressed concern about what the project means for their security.

Egypt meets up to 97% of its water needs from the waters of this river, particularly in the agricultural sector, which also accounts for a significant part of Egypt's gross domestic product. Furthermore, around 95% of Egypt's population of over 116 million lives within a few kilometres of the Nile. The land of the pharaohs cannot be understood without this river, on whose banks its people have prospered for five thousand years, relying on the silt left behind by the annual floods²⁴.

For Ethiopia, the dam represents an energy revolution, as its future output of 5,000 megawatts will generate annual export revenues of around USD 1 billion, as well as providing electricity to a large proportion of its population who currently lack access to it (Deutsche Welle, 2025). A stable energy source that lowers the price of electricity will also boost the development of other productive sectors and encourage foreign investment. This, combined with its vast pool of young labour, would accelerate national development and cement its position as the strongest economy in East Africa. If necessary, this energy could even fund a potential access to the sea, given the lack of financial liquidity.

But the benefits promised by the dam are not merely material: Addis Ababa presents the GERD as an example of its unstoppable geopolitical rise, which would, incidentally, justify its need for access to the sea. It also uses it as a necessary symbol to reinforce Ethiopian national cohesion and pride, so badly battered by endless internal ethnic uprisings.

Sudan, on the other hand, is in a better position than Egypt. The dam is not a matter of life and death for them, and they could even benefit from electricity exports and river flow management

²⁴ The ancient Egyptians called their country *km.t*—*Kemet*—, meaning 'black land', in reference to the fertile soil along the banks of the Nile created by silt, the sediment from its waters. Conversely, they called the arid desert terrain *Deshret*—red land.

in coordination with Ethiopia, but Al-Burhan's rigid alignment with his Egyptian counterpart and the cross-border conflicts of recent years have dashed any possibility of an understanding with their Ethiopian neighbour²⁵.

Despite several rounds of negotiations since 2015, no agreement has been reached. Cairo demands a binding treaty to regulate water flow during periods of drought, as well as the right to be consulted, alongside Khartoum, before the construction of any further infrastructure, but Ethiopia has rejected both demands. Addis Ababa, meanwhile, has promoted the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA), also known as the Entebbe Agreement, which came into force in 2024²⁶. This treaty seeks to replace the colonial-era agreements²⁷ that granted Egypt and Sudan majority control and veto power over projects on the Nile. The entry into force of the CFA allows for the creation of the Nile River Basin Commission (NRBC), a permanent institution for river management that will replace the 1999 Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), promoting cooperation among its members. However, Egypt and Sudan have rejected the agreement (Egypt Independent, 2024), arguing that it violates international law and threatens their water security, and insisting on maintaining their historical rights.

In early 2026, US President Donald Trump offered to mediate between the parties to reach an agreement on the dam (Europa Press Internacional, 2026b). This offer was received with enthusiasm by the Egyptian leader, Abdelfatah al-Sisi, although the previous offer, made during his first term, fell far short of the expected impartiality: the clauses clearly favoured Cairo, with whom Washington maintains close relations, and the US leader went so far as to back Egyptian threats to use force against the Ethiopian engineering project (Gavin, 2026).

With the parties entrenched in their positions, the formation of increasingly antagonistic blocs and the gradual deterioration of security in the Horn of Africa, it does not appear possible to reach an agreement on the use of the dam in the short term.

²⁵ In fact, Omar al-Bashir, the former Sudanese leader deposed by Al-Burhan and Hemedti, supported the Ethiopian GERD project. See Tekle, T. A. (2014). Sudan's Bashir affirms support for Ethiopia dam project [online]. Sudan Tribune. [Accessed: 2026]. Available at: <https://sudantribune.com/article/49656>

²⁶ The Entebbe Agreement has been ratified by Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and South Sudan (Nile Basin Initiative, 2024).

²⁷ Treaties signed in 1929 and 1959, which were signed without the participation of most of the countries in the Nile Basin, including Ethiopia.

To try to break this *deadlock*, Egypt could play the port card: a pact that would benefit both sides, whereby Addis Ababa would see its thirst for access to the sea quenched in exchange for a binding treaty on the GERD. However, Ethiopia's access to the sea is a red line that Cairo is not prepared to cross.

Historically, Egypt has viewed the Red Sea as its own domain; since the construction of the Suez Canal, as its vital artery²⁸. Egyptian strategists, therefore, cannot imagine a scenario in which Ethiopia holds the key to the southern entrance of that artery: in such a case, Addis Ababa could exert dual pressure—via the dam—, which would leave Cairo at its mercy.

This is what drives Egypt to seek the formation of a bloc opposed to Ethiopia, into which it is also attempting to include Saudi Arabia.

6 The Horn of Arabia

The Arabian Peninsula, with its Persian side, and the Horn of Africa, separated only by the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea corridor²⁹, constitute in many respects a single geopolitical system. United for centuries by religious, ethnic and linguistic ties—at times forming part of the same supranational entity³⁰—, they maintain intense trade and migration flows to this day.

The geostrategic importance of the waters separating them, economic and security calculations at the national level, and bilateral rivalries, among other factors, explain the interest aroused by the Horn of Africa on the other side of the Red Sea.

It should also be noted that this relationship is currently unbalanced: whilst the common denominator among the Horn's states is the instability and fragility of their governing institutions, the Arab monarchies are characterised by being iron-fisted autocracies whose immense wealth affords them the ability to buy social stability.

²⁸ Revenue from the canal is a key source of foreign exchange for Egypt—it is considered the third most important source, after remittances from foreign workers and the tourism sector—accounting for 1.5% of GDP and generating 5% of total government revenue in the 2021/2022 financial year. Revenue from canal traffic reached USD 9.4 billion in the 2022/2023 financial year, an all-time high (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024).

²⁹ The Red Sea has a maximum width of 335 km.

³⁰ The Ottoman Empire dominated or exerted its influence over much of the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa for centuries.

But they are so rich that they have nothing but money—money derived from hydrocarbons—and, in their quest to diversify their economies, they are making major investments in the Horn of Africa, where they also obtain many of the resources they lack.

6.1 When size doesn't matter

When discussing the major players on the geopolitical stage, geographical size is one of the first aspects that springs to mind; the United Arab Emirates would therefore be excluded from such a classification. Yet, its involvement in Arab and African affairs belies this prejudice.

A former active member of the anti-Houthi coalition, a staunch supporter of the Southern Yemeni Transitional Council, a key pillar of the RSF in Sudan, an ally of Marshal Haftar in Libya, a military backer of Addis Ababa in the Tigray war and an unrepentant investor in ports on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, amongst other things, Abu Dhabi's tentacles extend deep and firmly throughout the region.

Its growing influence in Africa is exemplified by investments estimated at USD 110 billion in recent years (Fana Media Corporation, 2026)—surpassing the European Union, the United States and China. In the countries of the Horn of Africa, specifically, it is not the main investor in material or energy resources: its projects in this region are worth around USD 4.3 billion³¹ and cover infrastructure, renewable energy, mining, financial services, agriculture and security.

But where it is the leading investor is in ports, because they are a resource that is just as valuable—if not more so—than the others, and it is clear that the UAE has taken Raleigh's maxim to heart³². Control of these strategic points, on a route that is crucial in its own right, grants control over global trade routes, regional power projection and economic security. This port acquisition strategy is carried out mainly through port management companies such as DP World and, to a lesser extent, AD Ports Group.

³¹ Ethiopia, with USD 2.3 billion, is the main destination for its investments. It is followed by Somalia, with nearly USD 613 million; Somaliland, with USD 539 million, and Eritrea, with USD 189.5 million (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025).

³² Walter Raleigh stated: 'He who controls the sea controls trade; he who controls trade controls the wealth of the world; and consequently the world itself'.

The asset portfolio³³ of these companies includes ports on the Red Sea and in the Gulf of Aden such as: Assab, in Eritrea; Berbera, in Somaliland, and Bosaso in Puntland³⁴. Their value lies in serving as logistics, storage and distribution hubs for goods between Africa and their destinations in the Persian Gulf; acting as control points for maritime traffic; and, in certain circumstances or if necessary, having a dual military use. The fact is that the Gulf states consider the Horn of Africa essential for the security of the Red Sea, as it provides them with strategic depth against hostile actors, as well as protecting vital maritime routes. The United Arab Emirates has also become an indispensable security partner in the east of the continent, providing money, weapons, logistics and training, although this very involvement has, in turn, contributed to the destabilisation and intensification of various conflicts in the region.

The other key aspect of the UAE's investment strategy in the Horn is agriculture. For Abu Dhabi, food security is a strategic priority, as it imports up to 85% of the food it consumes, given its scarcity of water and arable land. The amount of funding for agricultural projects in the region³⁵ is estimated at USD 1.7 billion, representing almost 40% of the total amount invested in the Horn of Africa. However, to fully understand this approach, one must look beyond the raw figures: by injecting money into food-producing lands, it gains much more than the land itself and its produce; it indirectly secures the water it no longer consumes on its own soil.

6.2 The Giant Stirrer

Geographical presence and economic might are aligned in Riyadh with a growing determination to assert its capabilities.

³³ In 2006, Djibouti signed a 30-year contract with DP World to build and manage the port of Doraleh, the largest and most sophisticated in the country. However, the Djiboutian government terminated the agreement in 2018, claiming that it violated its sovereignty.

³⁴ A semi-autonomous region in north-eastern Somalia that does not recognise the legitimacy of the central government in Mogadishu, although it does not advocate independence, unlike Somaliland.

³⁵ The United Arab Emirates is investing \$11.9 billion in agricultural projects in East Africa, although the vast majority of this sum, some \$10.2 billion, is earmarked for Sudan, a country which, strictly speaking, does not belong to the Horn of Africa.

The abundance in the Saudi treasury is reflected in the figures, with investment in the Horn of Africa amounting to around USD 13.5 billion. But its strategy in the region lacks the diversification seen in the UAE, as nearly USD 13 billion is concentrated in Djibouti alone, and of that, some USD 12.7 billion is tied up in a single megaproject³⁶.

In the field of security, Saudi Arabia has significantly scaled back its involvement in the Horn of Africa, although it shares Egypt's desire for stability in the Red Sea (Aftandilian, 2026). Both Riyadh and Cairo support the internationally recognised governments in the region³⁷, as they recognise that instability on land has an immediate impact on maritime security.

Al-Sisi, moreover, does not want new players in the already crowded game being played in the Red Sea, and is therefore seeking to prevent Ethiopian access to it. To achieve this, he is weaving a network of alliances with states in the Horn of Africa that share this opposition, but any security agreement worth its salt requires funding, and this is where the Saudis' financial muscle comes into play.

However, Riyadh's role goes beyond that of Cairo's banker, as both countries find themselves on the same side in several of the conflicts plaguing the region. Moreover, it is invariably the UAE that, in these conflicts, appears to be siding with the opposing faction.

The differing security strategies and conflicting national interests of these two monarchies have led to a rift that is also being played out in the Red Sea, the consequences of which have ultimately reverberated across the Horn of Africa. This dispute over supremacy has manifested itself in a race for the instruments that enable influence to be exerted: resources, control of trade routes and, by extension, the region's ports. In parallel with this race and linked to it, the convergence of interests has been shaping two blocs of alliances whose contours are becoming increasingly defined: the Triple A and the Counter-A.

³⁶ The refinery at the Damerjog International Park in Djibouti, a project by the Saudi company Aiyal Petroleum and Energy.

³⁷ In Yemen, opposing the Houthis; in Sudan, supporting the Sudanese Army against the RSF; and in Somalia, opposing the recognition of Somaliland's independence.

The Triple A takes its name from Addis-Abu-Aviv³⁸: the capitals which, on the Horn of Africa chessboard and in its immediate vicinity, have shown their support for the secessionist actors³⁹.

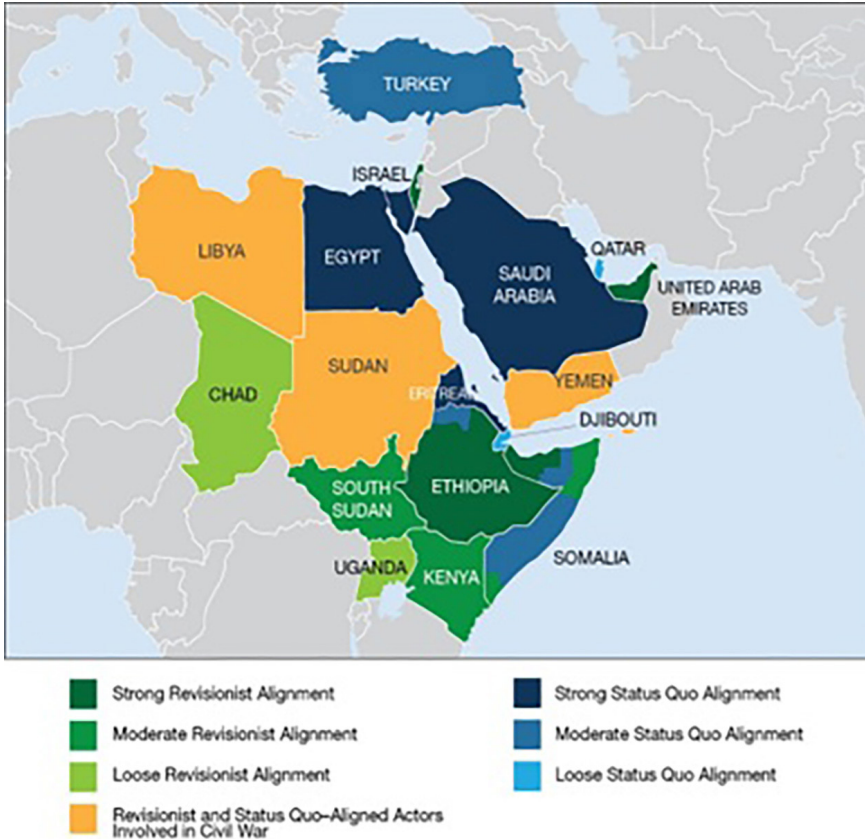


Figure 2. Blocs of interest in the Horn of Africa. Source: criticalthreats.org

Although their positions had already been converging over time on certain issues, particularly between the UAE and Israel (Cafiero, 2025), it could be argued that Somaliland has been their definitive meeting point. Israel's recognition of Somaliland's independence must be understood within the context of its broader

³⁸ Addis Ababa, Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv: the capitals of Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates and Israel, respectively.

³⁹ Somaliland, in Somalia; the Southern Transitional Council, in Yemen; and the RSF, in Sudan—although Israel's stance in Sudan is ambivalent, as it maintains dialogue with both sides.

strategic manoeuvring with Iran, the Houthis and Turkey⁴⁰. In any case, the consequence has been its definitive integration into the Horn of Africa scene.

Furthermore, other regional states with similar interests in certain respects, albeit with more flexible positions, could be considered part of this entente⁴¹.

The Counter-A bloc has formed in reaction to the aforementioned group. Its main driving forces are Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Eritrea, with a host of other members whose alignment is not so dogmatic and varies depending on the circumstances⁴².

Ultimately, any understanding—or lack thereof—between the members of the blocs revolves around resources and positioning in strategic locations which, in the Horn of Africa, alongside the Red Sea, is tantamount to saying the ports.

Finally, the war waged by the United States and Israel against Iran has highlighted the world's dependence on chokepoints: the mere announcement by Iran that it would close the Strait of Hormuz immediately sent fuel prices soaring. Furthermore, if the Houthis were to intervene in support of their Persian ally, they could attack the US base in Djibouti, the Emirati base in Berbera—where there are already signs of an Israeli military presence (Fioriti, 2026)—or exploit their cooperation with Al-Shabaab in the Gulf of Aden (Martín, 2024), now that Western naval forces are distracted. Any of these options, or all of them together, would extend the conflict to the Horn of Africa and would have an impact, in one way or another, on existing and imminent conflicts⁴³. The spread to the Horn would amount to instability in the Red Sea, which,

⁴⁰ Somaliland is located near the territory controlled by the Houthis, some 250–300 km from Yemen as the crow flies. An Israeli base there would also allow it to monitor movements in the Gulf of Aden and the Turkish base in Mogadishu.

⁴¹ States such as Kenya, South Sudan, Uganda and Chad, and regional entities such as Puntland in Somalia, share certain interests with the Triple A, although an explanation of these goes beyond the scope of this chapter.

⁴² Turkey and Somalia—and also Qatar—due to the dispute in Somaliland, and the TPLF in Tigray, along with the other Ethiopian militias temporarily aligned for convenience. Djibouti's position is more delicate, as we have already seen.

⁴³ The existing conflict in Sudan and the imminent one in Tigray. The impact could be to slow down or accelerate these conflicts in the short term. If Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates choose to temporarily set aside their differences and focus on containing Iranian retaliation, material support for their proxies could diminish, slowing down these clashes. Conversely, chaos in the region could encourage certain actors to take advantage of the fact that global public attention is focused elsewhere. Al-Shabaab could also gain ground in Somalia.

combined with that in the Strait of Hormuz, would have international economic consequences that are difficult to foresee.

7 Conclusions

In the capricious geography of the Horn of Africa, together with the vicissitudes of history, one can find the origin of much of the friction plaguing the region.

Ethiopia's geographical isolation has led to a desperate search for access to the sea, which arouses concern or, quite simply, hostility among its neighbours.

With Eritrea, a former province, historical grievances have resurfaced following a deceptive and temporary truce. In the midst of this, Ethiopia's ethnic fabric is conveniently exploited by Asmara to throw a spanner in the works of Addis Ababa's worrying growth.

Djibouti, the small port state that provides Ethiopia with its main route to the outside world, also fears losing the only resource with which it can negotiate with any real leverage against its large neighbour. Mogadishu, for its part, has already experienced first-hand an Ethiopian thirst for ports that called its very sovereignty into question.

But Ethiopia's geographical assets are not all negative, as its central highlands make it the dominant hydrological player in the region, granting it significant leverage for negotiation and influence.

Meanwhile, and linked to the above, the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam has placed it firmly in Egypt's sights, as Egypt is also opposed to Ethiopia's access to the sea. However, Addis Ababa is not prepared to give up an infrastructure project that is deemed crucial to its rapid rise to economic leadership in East Africa.

Furthermore, the situation in the Horn cannot be fully understood by analysing only the countries that, *strictly speaking*, make up the region.

Whilst it is true that its own internal dynamics already present a complex picture in themselves, the region's strategic location has led to the involvement of external powers in the affairs of the Horn. Subsequently, shared interests or common rivals have led to the formation of two mixed blocs, comprising both African

and Asian countries, whose ultimate aim is to consolidate their influence in the Red Sea.

Thus, the war against Iran or the outbreak of hostilities in Tigray could draw in other countries from these blocs, with consequent repercussions in the Red Sea, and affect the stability of a region of vital importance to global energy security.

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Chapter Four

Society and demography in the Horn of Africa

Fatuma Ahmed Ali

Abstract

This chapter focuses on society and demography in the Horn of Africa region in terms of placing youth, digital activism, migration, gender dynamics, political mobilization, ethnicity, and social structures in a wider context of analysing state-society relations. It conceptualizes the complex demographic tendency through population growth and age structures. It analyses the new forms of social mobilization and digital activism. It also examines migration, mobility, and social reconfiguration. The chapter discusses the gendered aspects of society and demography in the Horn of Africa. It also explains the link between political mobilization, ethnicity, and social organization in the Horn. Finally, it discusses the relations between the state and society and their implications on governance, legitimacy, and stability in the Horn of Africa region.

Keywords

Society and demography, Youth bulge, Digital activism, Migration, Gender, Horn of Africa.

1 Introduction

The Horn of Africa (HoA) region stands as a long-term strategic priority with its geographical closeness to the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean, as well as significant trade routes of the world, which have facilitated communication, the exchange of ideas, cultural influences, and migration for thousands of years between Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. The Horn region, also known as the Somali Peninsula, refers to the easternmost extension of the African continental landmass. The core states of the Horn include contemporary Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, and Somaliland (a *de facto* independent state not recognized internationally), as well as, in some accounts, Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya, and Uganda.

Not only is much of the natural environment of the Horn extremely forbidding, but vast differences in its environmental endowment, ranging from the plateau lands of northern Ethiopia through to the Somali scrub, create very different kinds of society, with dramatically contrasting values and ways of life (Clapham, 2018). The region falls on the frontier between two of the world's major religions, Islam and Christianity, and encompasses a huge range of ethnic groups, languages, and cultures (Clapham, 2018). These differences have, in turn, been intensified by patterns of colonial conquest (internal as well as external), the creation of highly artificial states, and the uneven incorporation of the region into the global economy and into global conflicts (Clapham, 2018). The Cold War affected the Horn far more directly and intensively than it did other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, and the region is now again on a global frontline in the so-called 'Great and Middle Power competition'. Moreover, within the last few decades, the region has been linked to a regular conflict, political instability, humanitarian disasters, and a weak state apparatus (Getahun Ashine, 2024).

Consequently, there has been significant literature on the Horn, focusing on elite politics, armed conflicts, violent extremist groups, migration, and foreign security interventions. Although these views are critical, they tend to underreport the social and demographic underlying factors that precondition the political actions, state potential, and stability over time. To comprehend the Horn of Africa, more specifically, it is necessary to pay more attention to the ways in which societies are organized, populations evolve, and relations between states and citizens are determined.

One of the most important structural forces that affects the region is demographic change. The population growth rate of most states in the Horn of Africa is among the highest worldwide, resulting in rapid population expansion and a large proportion of young people. These demographic processes operate on long time scales and influence labour markets, education systems, urban infrastructure, and political institutions. Demographic changes are irreversible and cumulative over time, unlike short-term political events. The issue of demography in this chapter is not considered as a background context, and it is rather one of the main forces that determine social relations and political consequences in the region.

Moreover, a characteristic of this demographic scenario is the youth bulge: the disproportionate number of younger generations relative to older generations. The potential size of the youth population can be a great social and economic asset, especially when education, employment, and participation in political affairs are offered. In situations where economic opportunities are scarce and the political systems are still oriented toward exclusiveness, demographic pressure may enhance frustrations, rivalry, and change demands. Youth experiences in the Horn of Africa are characterized by unequal education, elevated unemployment or underemployment, and limited opportunities to be involved in political activities. It is not youthfulness, but the relationship between demographic realities and institutional capacity that gives the youth bulge its political significance. The results vary, beginning with civic, innovative activity to protest, migration, mobilization, and recruitment to violent extremists or criminal networks.

Digital transformation is further influencing these dynamics. The increased availability of mobile phones, social media platforms, and online communication has changed how social grievances are expressed and how collective action is organized. Furthermore, digital spaces have emerged as significant arenas of political discussion, identity construction, and mobilization, especially among the younger generations. Hence, digital activism in the Horn of Africa does not establish social and political pressures alone; it makes the already existing demographic and social tensions more prominent and confronts the governmental control over information and political discourses. Meanwhile, governments have reacted by implementing novel digital surveillance, censorship, and repression, indicating the disputed digital space.

The social environment of the Horn is also challenged by mobility and migration. Conflict, climate stress, and economic hardship

have caused internal displacement that has redefined the urban centres and changed social organization patterns. The regional and international implications of cross-border migration and refugee flows are widespread, and the role of diaspora in domestic politics becomes more and more visible in terms of remittances, advocacy, and transnational activism. Migration is not merely a humanitarian or economic problem, but it is a deep social phenomenon that influences the family structures, gender roles, and political identities. To some young people, mobility is a coping mechanism and also a political message to a world at home that seems to have limited opportunity.

Furthermore, social identities and structures, especially those of ethnicity, gender, and informal institutions, continue to be at the heart of the explanation of how the Horn societies are responding to the demographic and political pressures. Ethnic identities are commonly described as inflexible or primordial, but in reality, they are dynamic and, in most cases, they are often reinvented through political contests, migration, and even state policies. On the same note, gender relations are experiencing a slow evolution with women finding their way through reforming economic roles, displacement, and political participation of various kinds. These social arrangements mediate access to resources, power, and security, shaping the relationships between individuals, groups, and the state.

Most evidently, combined, these dynamics merge in the realm of relations between the state and society. The high rate of demographic increase, young population ambitions, digital connectivity, migration, and even changing social identities exert a lot of pressure on the states that have little capacity to provide services, inclusion, and even legitimacy. Governments have, in most instances, used coercive techniques to deal with dissent, further undermining trust between state institutions and the citizens. The state-society relations in the Horn of Africa region would therefore need one to understand the influence of the social and demographic forces on governance issues, as well as the political behaviour.

This chapter explores the society and demography in the Horn of Africa region in terms of placing youth, digital activism, migration, gender dynamics, political mobilization, ethnicity, and social structures in a wider context of analysing state-society relations. It is organized into five sections with an introduction and a conclusion that discusses the relations between the state and society

and their implications on governance, legitimacy, and stability in the Horn of Africa region. The first section conceptualizes the demographic tendencies and the political importance of the youth bulge by explaining factors such as population growth, age structures, urbanization, and education. Here, the youth bulge is discussed not as a statistic, but as a disruptive political actor. The second section examines the new forms of social mobilization and digital activism by diving into social media, youth, activism, narrative formation, protest, repression, and their implications on authority and control in the region. The third section focuses on migration, mobility, and social reconfiguration. It examines the urban stress, internal displacement, cross-border migration, refugees, and the diaspora's effect on politics and identity. The fourth section analyses the gendered aspects of society and demography in the Horn of Africa region. The fifth section describes the connection between political mobilization, ethnicity, and social organization in the Horn region.

2 Understanding demography in the Horn of Africa: population growth and age structures

Worldometer (2026) predicted that in 2026, Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, and South Sudan will have estimated populations of approximately 230 million. Of the reported population, almost two-thirds are from Ethiopia alone, with an estimated 140 million people (Yeboua and Cilliers, 2023). It is followed by Sudan, with approximately 53.2 million people; Somalia, with 20.3 million, and South Sudan, with 12.4 million. Lastly, there are Eritrea and Djibouti, with estimated populations of 3.6 million and 1.1 million, respectively (Worldometer, 2026). The region's population is expected to reach 241 million by 2030, with an estimated growth rate of about 2.6% annually (Worldometer, 2026). It is important to note that this region has a very young population, reportedly accounting for over 70% of the population being below the age of thirty (Worldometer, 2026). The region possesses 12% of the world's youth population (Walhad, 2024). For example, half of Djibouti's population is no older than twenty five.

Ethiopia is the most populous nation in the region, with an expected population of over 152 million people by the year 2030, with almost half of the population being between the ages of fifteen and twenty nine. Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan's median population ages range from nineteen to

sixteen. There is a very high fertility rate in the whole region that keeps supplying the population with a regular injection of young generations. Indicatively, in 2023, Somalia had one of the highest rates of total fertility at 6.1 children per woman, compared to 3.7 and 3.9, respectively, on average in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and almost 4.8 in South Sudan (Statista, 2026). By contrast, Djibouti was at a less developed level of demographic transition, with a rate of about 2.6 children per woman (Statista, 2026). These patterns depict not only the magnitude of youth cohorts, but also their accumulation at ages at which people enter the labour market, begin higher education shifts, and experience political socialization.

This fertility, plus a falling child mortality rate, has resulted in age structures where a good percentage of the population is young. In the majority of the Horn countries, the median ages are very low, as low as sixteen years in Somalia, about nineteen years in Ethiopia, Sudan, Eritrea, and many other neighbouring states, much lower than those of the world as a whole, and indicating a strongly child-young population (Yeboua and Cilliers, 2023). However, differently, Djibouti's median age is approximately 25.7 years as of 2026. Such age distributions are reflected in high dependency ratios, implying that the number of working-age adults is comparatively low relative to the number of young dependents. Sub-Saharan Africa generalized data indicates that child dependency ratios can reach up to 69%, which is both socially and economically crippling to both households and the state (Tabutin and Schoumaker, 2020).

Youth bulge refers to the portion of the total adult population aged fifteen to twenty nine years old. It is generalized that countries tend to have political instability when adult's 40% population is comprised of ages between fifteen to twenty nine years, especially when coupled with failing economic development, the youth's limited participation in governance and education (Weber, 2019). With the exception of Djibouti, the Horn's youthful populace constrains the growth of the economy.

In relation to dependents, fewer people between the ages of fifteen and sixty five are working. This evidently disrupts economic stability in the Horn of Africa countries. Although historically, nations like South Korea and Taiwan achieved economic growth because of their young populations, it may not be the same case with the region under discussion. For a nation to experience a demographic dividend, it must have at least 1.7 working-aged

people for each dependent, yet except Djibouti with an estimate of 1.9, other states have not yet reached that and the projections of countries like Ethiopia and Eritrea to reach 1.7 are after 2040, while Somalia is projected to get there by 2070 with the remaining anticipated to reach 1.7:1 around the 2050s (Yeboua and Cilliers, 2023).

Urban areas have been identified as the most visible locations in the demographic pressures of the Horn of Africa because of the rapid rural-to-urban migration and population increase that have turned cities into the centres of youth economic and political challenges (Hammond *et al.*, 2025). Even though the Horn is still primarily rural, with average urbanization rates that are below the continental average, urban centres grow rapidly. In sub-Saharan Africa, almost half of the population is today urbanized, and the numbers are likely to keep on soaring as urbanization is not only a natural phenomenon, but it is also a form of migration (Cham, 2025). Although some countries like Djibouti have urban centres with concentrations of approximately four out of five inhabitants, other countries like Ethiopia are agriculturally based, yet with a fast-growing urban cover. Ethiopia has an even greater case of urban population increase of about 10.8 million in 2002 to a population of 28 million in 2022, with Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar, and other second-tier cities rising exponentially in the last twenty years (Macrotrends, s. f.).

It is vital to note that urbanization in the Horn of Africa is uneven across countries. This city boom puts a strident strain on housing, infrastructure, services, and employment. A good number of urban migrants, particularly the youth, end up in growing informal settlements where they experience precarious employment, lack access to services, and have diverse opportunities to access stable livelihoods.

The education systems of the region have grown over the last ten years, in terms of population increase, as well as political investment in increased access to education. More enrolment at the primary and secondary levels has expanded literacy and low-level skills among the youth, and the result is a generation that is more conscious of regional and international problems. However, there has not been equal growth in formal employment opportunities in keeping pace with the growth of education. In most of the Horn states, young generations of educated people join the labour markets in their numbers and cannot find employment opportunities, which causes underemployment, work in the

informal sector, and growth of demands that cannot be met with state efforts (International Organization for Migration, 2022a). Such a discrepancy between increased education and low economic absorption defines the political consciousness and desires more than it grounds stable economic integration.

The political consequences are many-sided. Education does not merely impart skills to the youth; it also brings consciousness to social, economic, and political options, especially in situations where the formal labour markets are not strong. With increased educational levels and still no corresponding rise in employment and wage earners, young people in the cities will be more prone to voice displeasure with the governance, confront the state institutions, and organize themselves around issues of inclusion and equity. Education, in this regard, heightens expectations more quickly than states in the region have been capable of meeting them, and this process is played out in protests, community organization, and new manifestations of political participation, which cannot be explained outside of the larger demographic change of the society.

3 New forms of social mobilisation and digital activism

In the 21st century, the world has turned into a global village in terms of civic participation and political representation through the use of digital technologies. Young people in the Horn of Africa have found digital platforms to be valuable for voicing complaints, constructing networks, and disrupting the status quo in governance because the formal avenues of participation in politics have been insufficient and state-society relationships strained due to population pressures and unequal governance.

Digital activism has become a tool whereby young people have converted social pressures into direct and organized social and political action, bypassing normal media and institutional intermediaries, compared to being a mere supplement to offline action. Internet access and mobile connectivity in the Horn of Africa are still relatively low compared to most of the world; however, they have grown significantly both in urban and peri-urban regions in the last decade. With one of the lowest Internet penetration rates on the continent, social media users reached almost 6.35 million in Ethiopia in 2022, although the government still attempted to block access (while the situation significantly improved, almost doubling the number of users in the country in nearly three years) (Kemp, 2022). Internet penetration rate in Djibouti is 65%, and

comparatively low in Eritrea, which is 20% (Kemp, 2025). Kenya, considered the leading country in digital adoption, reached roughly 40-56% Internet access between 2024 and 2025 (Association for Progressive Communications and Kenya ICT Action Network, 2025). Other African-wide trends are the accelerating growth in digital access, whereby by 2024 approximately 40% of Africans report having frequent Internet access, with over 600 million people using the Internet (Diagana and Wadagni, 2025).

Mobile phones and social applications have become important points of communication even in areas that have minimal infrastructure. Information sharing and coordination through messaging apps (WhatsApp, Telegram, etc.) are commonly utilized in situations where the traditional media are either state-owned or threatened. Actors of civil society and the networks of diaspora have also been involved in the introduction of digital spaces to communities that are less formal in their connectivity, which is added to hybrid systems of information circulation that incorporate both local and online media in unique ways.

This digital penetration that is uneven yet on an increasing trend has altered the landscape of political participation. In what used to be limited to geography and the state monopolization of the TV and newspaper, social platforms have offered comparatively easy areas of articulation and organizing. This has been further expanded by the emergence of cheap smartphones and prepaid data services even during economic crunch, especially among the urban youth.

To a lot of young Africans and especially youth in the Horn, digital platforms no longer remain peripheral to political life; they are central to the conceptualization and actualization of activism. In the continent, the youth have been using social media to coordinate protests, spread information quickly, and voice complaints on a scale that was not feasible ten years ago. Although data on the Horn specifically might be patchy, the cases on a region-wide level demonstrate the more general tendencies: in Kenya in 2024, young activists mobilized opposition to a controversial Finance Bill, organized protests on a national scale with the help of X (then Twitter), TikTok, and Facebook, and framed the discussion about government and responsibility (Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa, 2025).

Online activism among young people is not only limited to physical demonstrations. The virtual spaces have been transformed into social spaces where they can discuss and coordinate action

and articulate the story of dissatisfaction and communal identity. On the other hand, digital activism can help bridge the civic and formal political realms; recently, young people have gathered on social media in Uganda to interact with political leadership and organize around political practices.

Unlike the inadequate infrastructures and frequent government incursions, youth in Ethiopia have used the Internet to disseminate news on protests, human rights violations, and political arrests despite the situations where governments are blocking or closing down online communications to hush up mobilization efforts. Similarly, anti-government protests were sparked in 2020 by a viral video of a detained air force pilot who claimed to have been tortured (Reuters, 2020). These trends represent a wider transnational turn: African young people are becoming more visible, more vocal in digital space, and are becoming the scene of socialization in politics and networked activism.

The influence of digital activism on the formation of narratives—that is, which stories gain the attention of the public, the manner in which grievances are packaged, and who has a voice—is one of the most important effects of digital activism. Digital platforms offer memes, hashtags, livestreams, and peer-to-peer storytelling tools capable of quickly changing the state of the debate and finding support across and outside national boundaries.

For instance, the protests in Kenya in 2024 led by Gen Z are a bright illustration: hashtags and viral posts served to define the identities of protestors, organize actions, and keep the momentum, as well as to attract the attention of the global community to the local demands in order to get accountability and change the existing order (Reuters, 2020). Although not a native of the Horn itself, the patterns in the regions are educative in the process of perceiving similarities in how young people use digital technology to create a story, which forms the basis of mobilization.

Nevertheless, cyberspaces are debatable, as well. Governments and security agencies have increasingly been attempting to dislocate or subjugate online mobilization, setting up Internet blackouts, obstructing individual applications, and implementing spying technologies in eras of turmoil. For example, the increased penetration of social media into Ethiopia coincided with the early part of Prime Minister Abiy's tenure, when there appeared to be a greater openness to freedom of political expression via digital platforms, which resulted in hate speech,

misinformation, or disinformation, resulting in the government restricting Internet access to some extent (Chonka, 2025). In 2024, Internet shutdowns were at record high levels across the continent of Africa, and the authorities frequently used national security, political instability, or protests as the reasons. Not only are such measures useful in hindering coordination, but activists have to become innovative with other tools, including encrypted messaging applications, VPNs, and peer-to-peer networks.

The battle of narration does not only lie between activists and states, but also within communities. Social media platforms have been filled with disinformation, hate speech, and messages with ethnic undertones, such as in the case of Ethiopia, where the social divide is already established, and the digital movements sometimes intensify the situation, making it hard to create common civic ground. This twofold truth, empowerment and danger, highlights how difficult digital mobilization in transitional societies is.

In the Horn of Africa, it has been noted that digital activism has the possibility of changing the balance of power. The social platforms erode the power of the states to monopolize information flows by facilitating decentralized networks of communication. This does not give the youth uniform power; it benefits other actors, such as political elites, foreign interests, and non-state armed groups, who can use digital spaces to propagate and recruit new members. However, the emergence of digital mobilization under the leadership of young people is one of the indications of the change, like the creation of political pressure and the necessity to negotiate authority in the digital world. A combination of repression, co-optation, and digital policy changes is the response of states. Blackouts on the Internet, banning of platforms, cybercrime legislation, and surveillance equipment are in place to limit mobilization as well as to enforce the conditions of online interaction. International advocacy groups and civil societies have countered these steps, highlighting the importance of digital rights in the wider governance discussion.

Meanwhile, the grassroots activists demonstrate how digital activism might be used in a positive direction. Digital storytelling and youth-focused projects in Somalia, Djibouti, and Ethiopia are used to counter extremist messages and communications, and support peacebuilding by focusing on ethics in digital activities and building community resilience. These campaigns prove

that digital advocacy is not only resistance, but redefines civic engagement and national histories.

4 Migration, mobility, and social reconfiguration

Over thousands of years, the movement of people has been an important feature in the demographic trends in the region. People have migrated and intermixed for centuries, resulting in the spread of cultural influences and affinity transcending modern borders. Furthermore, mobility in the Horn of Africa is characterized by mixed migration, wherein different categories of migrants move within and out of the region. This region has three main interregional routes: the Eastern Route towards the Arabian Peninsula and in particular Saudi Arabia, the Southern Route towards the southern part of the continent, in particular South Africa, and the Northern Route towards North Africa and Europe. Important flows also take place within the region, which are classified as the Horn of Africa Route (International Organization for Migration, 2022b).

Consequently, demographic changes and social strains that have been in existence in the Horn of Africa have not only influenced domestic politics and the hopes of the youth, but have also facilitated differentiating trends in human mobility. The phenomenon of migration within the region is a complex social process, which includes internal displacement, flight across the border, gendered movement, and diaspora activities. These mobility practices cannot be considered independently of the larger demographic and governance processes, but instead they are themselves shaped by, as well as remakers of, social structures, identity processes, and the politics of the Horn.

In the Horn of Africa, internal displacement is at a high level, like it has never been before, and this has been caused by a combination of conflict, environmental shocks, and food insecurity. By the end of 2024, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2025a) reported that the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region have been home to about 5.6 million refugees and asylum-seekers and 20.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), summing up to 26.3 million people, which increased compared to previous figures, due to the conflict in Sudan and climatic shocks. A large proportion of these movements was due to Sudan alone accounting for 11.6 million IDPs; followed by Somalia, 3.9 million; Ethiopia, 3.3 million, and South

Sudan, 1.8 million, resulting in significant displacement (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025a). Additionally, during the same period, 18% of the Eritrean population, thus 655,000 people, were reportedly forcibly displaced (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). Among such displaced groups, millions of people are trapped in secondary displacement cycles because of insecurity and climatic stress. On the contrary, Djibouti acts as a transit hub and one of the major hosts to its neighbouring states' refugees and asylum seekers; for example, in 2021 the country hosted an approximate of 34,005 refugees from Somalia, Ethiopia, Yemen, Eritrea, and other countries (Migrants-Refugees, 2022).

The displacement internally tends to cause acute urban pressure when individuals take refuge in towns and cities that lack adequate infrastructure or social amenities (Mombelloni, 2024). To explore this point, the cities in Africa like Khartoum, Mogadishu, and Juba have experienced high rates of IDPs that have overloaded already stressed housing, health, and education systems. The limited access to livelihood opportunities and weak social networks of informal settlements at the periphery of urban centres increase the vulnerability of many IDPs. Additionally, a secondary movement of IDPs, who must resettle because of new acts of violence or weather disasters, also intensifies the level of social fragmentation and weakens the survival of the community.

The pressure of displacement has been increased in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia by environmental changes like long-term droughts and floods caused by climate change. The displacement caused by drought is disproportionately visible in rural areas, but the effect is felt in the cities too, as pastoralism and small-scale agricultural livelihoods are destroyed, and the rural people seek employment and services in the city. Such movements redefine the urban society, establishing new patterns of settlement, work, and participation in politics, which in turn change social structures and demands on the policy (Amir, 2024). For example, the World Bank had projected the Ethiopian population to reach 42 million in 2034, tripling from 15 million in 2012 (Diagana and Wadagni, 2025).

The other significant aspect of movement within the Horn of Africa is cross-border movements. The wars and insecurity have forced millions of people to flee across national borders. For example, over 242,000 migratory movements were recorded during the first half of 2025. Additionally, 98% of the movements were

recorded along the Eastern Route, with most migrants being from Ethiopia's regions: Amhara, Oromia, and Tigray (Humanitarian Action, 2025). Moreover, Sudanese migration, being the world's largest, reaching over 11.7 million people, has strained neighbours like South Sudan, Chad, Uganda, and Egypt, which have large populations of refugees, as well as other displaced people (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025b). Combined with the large numbers of displaced people in the area, this caused millions of refugees and asylum seekers to be hosted in the Horn by the end of 2025.

There are important social implications of these cross-border movements. To begin with, they change demographic patterns in host regions, affecting the labour markets, service delivery, and ethnic relations (Desiderio, 2016). Second, refugees create diasporic communities that are connected to their countries of origin, and these communities influence the cross-border communications and remittances (Adugna, 2018). In times of acute displacement, border towns and camps develop at a very fast pace and result in complex configurations of social interaction between refugees and host peoples, which sometimes lead to rivalry in accessing scarce resources, and at other times to cultural exchange and social hybridization.

The diaspora from the Horn of Africa is involved in complicated processes to influence the political discourse and social identities within and outside the region. Migrant communities settled in Europe, North America, and the Middle East have a tendency to have close emotional and material ties with their families back home. These relations encompass remittances, a major source of income to households in nations such as Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia, and information flows, which affect the expectations, political awareness, and transnational identity formation (Cuko and Traoré, 2008).

Political mobilization is another area of engagement of the diasporic community. Expatriates tend to form communities in terms of the problems of governance, human rights, and conflict management, which creates pressure on home- and host-country policies. The diaspora networks have at times been involved in peacebuilding, opposition movements, or assisted in opposition movements and used their relative safety and resources in their host countries to alter the debate in their home countries. The impact of the diasporic political activity transforms how citizens in the Horn perceive state legitimacy, accountability, and

belonging; as such, transnational identities collide with the local social structures.

5 Gendered aspects of society and demography in the Horn of Africa region

Enhanced urbanization and government-initiated reforms in Djibouti have led to higher female representation in politics, though participation in labour is poor (Republic of Djibouti). A different example is that of Eritrea, where women have traditionally engaged in national service and liberation discourses, which in turn have converted to public life roles, without generating structural changes in economic empowerment (Amahazion, 2025). On the contrary, in Ethiopia and Somalia, the role of women is more deeply entrenched within informal economies as well as community resilience frameworks, especially when there is displacement and conflict (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). Such differences indicate that gender in the Horn of Africa cannot be perceived as a unified experience, but as being conditioned by specific political economies and historical developments.

In the Horn of Africa, the gendered aspects are more rooted in the demographic framework and social changes. The high rate of population growth, unequal urbanization, economic insecurity, and protracted conflict have transformed the household structure, the division of labour, and patterns of authority in a distinctively gendered manner. Instead of viewing gender as a secondary issue, it should be perceived as a major structuring principle of social and demographic shifts in the region. In the Horn, the women are in a structurally important role, but an unequally empowered role in the society demographically (Abdi, 2011).

The demographics in the Horn of Africa show that almost 50% of the population comprises women, yet their empowerment against men is uneven. For instance, women and girls in Djibouti account for 50.4% of the country's population. Women head 19% of the households, yet their labour participation is 18.2% against men, which is 45%. Additionally, women hold about 26% of parliamentary seats. In Eritrea, the population has 50.7% women, with a notable 47.5% female headed households, whilst in Ethiopia, women account for 49.8% of the country's population, having them heading 22.1% of the households. Their labour participation is around 75%, yet they are overrepresented when it comes to unpaid labour and informal work. Likewise, in Somalia, 49.9%

of the population is women, with between 47-66% of the households being headed by women due to prevalent conflict and subsequent displacements. Nevertheless, their labour participation is significantly low at about 29.4%. Meanwhile, women in Sudan before the recent conflict represented a 50% portion of the population, with labour force participation accounting to 29.4% and with 31% parliamentary seats (World Bank Group, 2025).

Demographic trends in several countries in the Horn are also a manifestation of gender stereotypes and norms regarding marriage, reproductive expectations, and the social importance of women. Women in most rural and peri-urban areas still have their social identity largely attached to motherhood and home care, which restricts access to education, political processes, and formal jobs (Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa Network, 2011).

However, these patterns have been starting to change with urbanization and economic restructuring. With the fall of the rural livelihood and the rise of the informal economic activities, women are now more engaged in cross-border trade, the care economy, and the service industry. This economic involvement does not always mean structural empowerment, but it does change household bargaining power and intra-family authority. In other settings, women have turned into key income earners, particularly where the traditional male breadwinner's role has been disrupted by male unemployment, migration, and conflict-related absence. These changes bring about subtle but profound changes in gender hierarchies, despite the formal legal and political institutions falling behind.

Gender relations are also reconstructed by conflict and insecurity. The sustained instability in the Horn has affected the social protection measures by creating an increased vulnerability to violence among women and also forcing them to take on a greater economic and social burden (Birch *et al.*, 2023). Gender-based violence is a widespread phenomenon, especially in weak and war-torn settings, which promotes structural imbalances. But conflict also provides paradoxical spaces of renegotiation of social roles: women organize within their communities, engage in informal governance arrangements, and provide resilience networks in their locality (Odary, Komba and Nyamato, 2020).

Another important demographic aspect is in education. Increased access to primary and secondary education among the girls in the region has started working to change the expectations of marriage

age, fertility, and labour participation (Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa Network, 2011). Nevertheless, such gains are still uneven because of rural-urban and socio-economic differences.

With education levels rising, fertility tends to fall, and the participation in the labour force by women becomes diverse, slowly altering demographic trends. Hence, in the Horn of Africa, there is a growing impact of women not only as social actors but as policy influencers, as they are transforming the nature of governance internally. Women in countries like Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and others (Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa Network, 2026) have been at the forefront of the constitutional consultations, community reconciliation, and national dialogue processes, where they have regularly argued in favour of inclusive governance, a social protection framework, and gender-responsive reforms (Rubio-Marín and Irving, 2019).

Grassroots women's networks have worked through the local conflicts, negotiated across clans, and played a role in the transitional justice discourse, and it has been observed that peace-building is not localized in the political settlements of the elites but rather embedded within the societal structure (Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa Network, 2011). Female parliamentarians, civil society leaders, and policy advisors have also influenced laws on gender-based violence, education access, and inclusion, and related security to social welfare and demographic stability. When peace initiatives are based on experienced social realities, especially on family welfare, displacement, and youth vulnerability, women leaders tend to broaden the concept of security past militarized reactions. The increasing involvement in policy making and the framing of the process of reconciliation is an indication of gradual yet significant change to more inclusive forms of governance, where representation and social accountability roles in policy making have become elements of legitimacy as opposed to coercion alone.

In a nutshell, the demographic change in the Horn of Africa is impossible to comprehend without gender forecasting. The functions of reproduction, work, care, and organization of the community of women ensure the social fabric even in the face of rapid change. As societies confront the growth of youth populations, economic and political instability, and gendered relations, said relations are the primary focus of domestic adjustment, the formation of authority, and the establishment of legitimacy. Thus, gender is not

a sub-thematic issue within youth or migration, but a foundational area of social demography and state-society relations in the region.

6 Political mobilisation, ethnicity and social organization

Ethnicity has remained a highly relevant principle of organization in the Horn of Africa that defines political mobilization, resource access, and authority claims. Ethnic identity in most states that make up the region overlaps with the past structures of marginalization, ownership of land, and the history of state formation, and as such, it is a potent source of political statements (Hassan, 2025). Ethnic attachment tends to offer a model within which groups express grievances on governance, representation, and economic exclusion.

In Ethiopia, as an example, ethnic federalism established identity as the foundation of state administration, entrenching ethnicity into the state institutions and political life (Fiseha, 2019). Although this framework was meant to control diversity and decentralize power, it has also increased ethnic mobilization, especially when there is a transition of power. In some other cases, such as Somalia and Djibouti (Leta, Zeray and Haile, 2015), political involvement, conflict management, and access to state resources remain organized by clan identities, which both provide a stabilizing social network and a source of fragmentation.

Notably, ethnicity in the Horn cannot be interpreted as something unchangeable and primordial. Ethnic identities are also activated in a strategic manner following demographic pressures, land and job competitions, as well as feelings of unequal state treatment. Young people, especially teenagers, can be recruited around ethnicised stories where they cannot see opportunities in their economic activities, and the formal political systems seem like a closed door (African Union, 2020). Ethnic identity provides a feeling of belonging and political leverage in this kind of scenario, although it may contribute to the increase of social polarization.

Social life in the Horn of Africa is also dominated by an implication of informal institutions alongside formal state institutions that govern behaviour, adjudicate disputes, and distribute power. These are clan systems, customary law, religious institutions, and councils of the elders in the community (Mengisteab, 2019). These systems frequently occupy governance spaces that are underrepresented by the state, such as rural and peri-urban regions.

The informal institutions have a significant role in controlling the demographic pressure. With increased population and strained resources, households and communities have to find refuge in kinship and mutual commitments to welcome social shocks. These networks are crucial to sustaining networks in situations of displacement or migration, which make available housing, jobs, and social protection. Concurrently, informal structures may strengthen the hierarchies based on age, sex, and kinship and restrict the freedom of choice and movement.

These traditional arrangements are under growing pressure from urbanization and social change that is being driven by young people. Based on the exposure to new ideas through education and other digital media, younger generations tend to challenge the authority of the elders and traditional leaders. This conflict of generations corresponds to the general changes in social organization, since informal institutions respond to emerging changes in demographic and economic conditions in an uneven way. Whereas there are structures that are transformed to suit new functions and demands, there are those that develop as arenas of contention, especially when they are seen to limit an opportunity or support marginalization.

With the social change and rapid population growth, the continuity of many of the fundamental aspects of social organization in the Horn of Africa is quite striking. Ethnic identities and kinship relations, as well as informal institutions, have remained the way of organizing everyday life and intermediating access to resources and power. These long-lasting structures give certainty in situations where political and economic instability prevail.

Meanwhile, change is unquestionable. Social youth movements, digital communication, urbanization, and migration are transforming the way identities are manifested and the way authority is challenged. The old hierarchies founded on age, gender, and lineage are being confronted by new types of social structures of individual aspiration, transnational belonging, and political action outside formal institutions.

This continuity and change co-exist to create a dynamic social landscape. The social structures are not collapsing or stagnating, but they are being renegotiated under the pressure of demographic factors. What emerges is a complicated interplay between inherited types of order and evolving social reality, which carries

with it some serious consequences in the way in which governance, cohesion, and political stability should be maintained.

7 Conclusion. The relations between the state and the society and its implications on governance, legitimacy, and stability in the Horn of Africa

Intertwining demographic, technological, and mobility-based changes are redefining both state-society relationships in the Horn of Africa. Populations dominated by the youth, increased digital connectivity, and enduring migration trends have also changed the relationship to political authority among societies due to ethnic and gendered inequalities. Such changes do not merely create momentary disturbances; they redefine anticipations of leadership, involvement, and authority. This has led to the strained relationship that exists between states and their societies, and one that is marked by weak legitimacy, an increased dependence on coercion, and an uneven future regarding stability.

The social foundation of political legitimacy has shifted radically, due to the social power of the youth. In most of the Horn, the governments remain functioning under institutional arrangements and elite bargains that were made in former periods in history and are usually focused on controlling the rural areas, the way of giving out patronage, or security systems. But the younger generations as a whole, especially the ones that have been influenced by a broader education and a more urbanized lifestyle, judge authority by other means. Employment, being included in the decision-making process, providing services, and responding to social grievances are increasingly becoming the standards by which states are evaluated.

This creates an increasing gap of legitimacy. States are supposed to do things that are beyond their financial, administrative, and institutional capabilities, whereas young citizens are more opposed to deferential or clientelist political relations. Notably, this point does not just represent an ideological breach; it is structural. Age structure constrains the rate at which governments can absorb the entrants in the labour market, expand services, or redistribute resources. When the expectations grow faster than the delivery happens, it is not incidental but endemic, and it erodes the trust in the institutions of the state as well as the political leadership.

These legitimacy challenges have been worsened by the digital technologies that have transformed the ways of political engagement. The social media sites enable the youth and the urban population to voice their grievances, spread other stories, and organize mass movements faster and on a larger scale than ever before. These are not tools that substitute authority; however, they mediate the existing relationship between society and authority, decreasing the price of coordination and increasing the voices that were initially marginalized.

To those states, which were used to dealing with dissent by using controlled media spaces or localized forms of repression, digital activism is a deep challenge. The flows of information become more difficult to contain, the stories become elusive to the official frames, and even repression itself can be seen and challenged. Consequently, the governments are starting to think less of these as a place to participate and more of these as a place of threat to their security. Internet blackouts, spying, and online intimidation have emerged as standard reactions, part of a more general shift to think of social mobilization not as a deliberative act but as something destabilizing.

It is a mistrust that is strengthened. In the case of criminalization or securitization of digital expression, young people make repression the message that establishing a formal political institution is futile. The consequence is that this leads to a vicious circle: once legitimacy is diminished, people are more likely to protest, and this means that more coercion will lead to a decrease in legitimacy.

Migration also makes the relation between the state and the society in the Horn complex by dividing the social contract both spatially and socially. Internal displacement and urbanization also place a strain on the local authorities, with the result being unequal access to services and inequalities as well. Populations that are displaced may not be governed by formal apparatus, but through humanitarian aid organisations, informal networks, or communal agreements. This undermines the state's presence and powers, particularly in the urban periphery as well as in conflict-prone areas.

The political power is also transformed by the cross-border movement and the diasporic interaction. Diaspora people affect the politics of the home country via remittance, advocacy, and the flow of information, which tend to create new political norms and expectations. Although such transnational

connections can help thrive and survive economically, they might also isolate legitimacy from the territorial governance. The state can no longer play the central mediator in distributing social welfare and representation, as economic security and political voice are becoming increasingly located outside of the institutions of the nation.

Furthermore, in the Horn of Africa, ethnicity is still a focal point around which relations between the state and society are organized. The politics of ethnic inclusion, exclusion, or balance is a common way of negotiating political power, especially in a federal or post-conflict environment. The mobilization of the youth and digital activism often overlaps with ethnic identities, enhancing grievances that are related to marginalization or unequal access to resources in the past. Although these dynamics have the capacity of strengthening collective claims, they also tend to enhance polarization in situations where states are selective or securitize ethnic mobilization.

In terms of gender, there is another dimension where women perceive the power of the state differently, as they were deprived of equality in accessing economic opportunities, lawful safeguards, and representation in politics. Additionally, migration and displacement tend to burden women with responsibilities but a lesser ability to obtain institutional aid, hence gaps in state responsiveness. Meanwhile, the informal economies, community networks, and online spheres of female involvement illustrate the application of some forms of agency that are outside of formal governance frameworks. The inability to introduce gendered experiences into policy systems makes state legitimacy among critical segments of society even weaker.

The combination of the pressure of the youth, the digital mobilization, the fragmentation caused by migration, and the grievances based on identity assists in understanding why coercion has taken centre stage in governance in much of the Horn. Having a weak ability to provide both economically and politically, states find it more and more necessary to control dissent with the help of security apparatuses. Coercion provides short-term dominance at long-term prices: it lies in the constriction of political space, decimation of institutional trust, and strengthening of exclusion sensations.

Importantly, coercion is not merely a policy option; it is an option that is limited. In situations that have little fiscal space, slow institutional reform, and weak elite coalitions, repression will be

a default mechanism of sustaining power. Nevertheless, in societies where young people are predominant, and the digital connectivity is on the rise, coercion cannot control the legitimacy restoration as much as it is likely to generate resistance cycles and repressions.

The changing relationship between the state and society in the Horn of Africa has far-reaching consequences for governance and stability in the region. Hence, stability can never be defined in terms of lack of conflict, and it is hinged on the ability of states to adjust themselves to the evolving social realities. Inclusion of the youth, meaningful political participation, and reality in service delivery is no longer a choice but a precondition for sustainable authority.

Meanwhile, digital governance, migration management, and gender-responsive policies are the key to restoring confidence between states and societies. The lack of consideration of these interlinked pressures threatens to consolidate the coercive form of government and instability.

In conclusion, the digitalization of the Horn of Africa, demographic pressures, and migration occur within deep-rooted identity and social organization systems. It is still centred on ethnicity, gender relations, and informal institutions of how individuals perceive state authority, political mobilization, and social change. These social structures are not stagnant or purely traditional, but they are dynamic in a constant state of reorganization and restructuring due to economic stress, war, urbanization, and youth bulge. The mediation of continuity as well as change in state-society relationship through identity and social organization thus demands close attention to the meaning of understanding the society and demography in the Horn of Africa region.

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Chapter Five

The Horn of Africa at a global crossroads: geostrategy, debt and trade

Jaume Portell Caño

Abstract

This analysis examines the complex geopolitical and economic dynamics in the Horn of Africa, a region of critical strategic importance. It explores how global and regional powers compete for influence in an area marked by state fragility and conflict. The study mentions the case of Ethiopia, whose infrastructure and external debt-driven growth model was derailed by a confluence of shocks: the internal war in Tigray, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the global inflation crisis, which led the country to default on its sovereign debt in 2023. It analyses China's ambivalent role as a major bilateral creditor and infrastructure provider, as well as the regional dependence on exports of unprocessed commodities (coffee, gold) and on IMF funding to resolve liquidity crises. Finally, it highlights the paradox that remittances sent by the diaspora, created by a lack of local opportunities, have become a more stable source of hard currency than exports, and the potential opportunities this generates.

Keywords

Diaspora, Finance, Horn of Africa, Trade, Geopolitics.

1 Introducción

2025 seemed ready to conclude amidst a period of geopolitical upheaval that included a trade war between China and the United States, which ultimately affected the entire world. However, just days before the year's end, one last surprise was about to emerge: a territory that has been *de facto* independent for over thirty years, a product of the end of the Cold War and the destruction of the Somali state, was about to reappear in the headlines of some newspapers and social media. On 26 December 2025, Israel recognized Somaliland, a territory in East Africa, as a state.

The move was not followed by any other country and drew explicit condemnation from China. The Asian giant supports the territorial unity of Somalia and stressed that no country should 'incite or support separatist forces.' An article published in the Asian press noted that US President Donald Trump had responded negatively to the possibility of recognizing Somaliland but stated he would study the issue (Nyabiage, 2025). This is a symptom of the importance the Horn of Africa holds for the world's future.

The Israeli recognition of Somaliland's independence unsettled neighbours in the region, starting with Djibouti and Somalia—the country that would lose the territory if Somaliland were independent—and was surely perceived differently in Ethiopia. This landlocked country had already attempted to recognize Somaliland's independence in early 2024 (Tadesse and Ahmed, 2024): Ethiopia would gain access to the port of Somaliland—and thus to the sea—for a period of fifty years. Somaliland would obtain, in addition to recognition, a stake in Ethiopian Airlines, one of the most recognized and successful airlines on the African continent. Faced with Somali indignation, Addis Ababa backtracked. China protested Somaliland's recognition, as it has been investing in the region for years, maintains a military base in Djibouti, and prioritizes the territorial and political stability of its allies; furthermore, one of Somaliland's key allies is Taiwan. In other words: the China-Taiwan conflict is also playing out in this corner of Africa.

Israel seeks to gain a new ally to join the Abraham Accords, which had been bringing Israel closer to Arab and Muslim-majority countries, before the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023 froze that *rapprochement* indefinitely. The United Arab Emirates has been investing in the port of Berbera for years, where Emirati company DP World holds a 30-year concession that began in 2016, with an investment

exceeding USD 400 million. In October 2025, the Government of Dubai (2025) announced a maritime connection between an Emirati port and Berbera. Somaliland's port is one of the most efficient in Africa, according to a World Bank report (World Bank Group, 2024), yet it is not operating at full capacity. The territory, whose GDP depends largely on remittances—which account for one-third of the total—, is hampered by its lack of international recognition, which prevents it from accessing financial markets and credit. This situation has forced it to organize itself autonomously, but it has also meant it is constantly falling short of its full potential. A metaphor perfectly illustrates this: a local businessman, Ahmed Osman Guelleh, launched a Coca-Cola bottling plant in 2012, but it is only running at 50% capacity. 'We have done our half; the other half will come when we have recognition,' the president of Somaliland, Abdirahman Mohammed Abdullahi, told the *Financial Times* in mid-March of this year. The article in the British financial newspaper explains that, with the exception of water, all of the plant's inputs are imported (Wallis, 2026).

The strategic importance of the Horn of Africa was indirectly thrust onto the table from late February onwards, following a joint Israeli-American attack on Iran. Under various pretexts—the need to topple a corrupt and unpopular regime, and defence against a potential attack—both countries bombed Iran and assassinated Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, on 28 February 2026. Iran retaliated by striking several of its neighbours—hosts to US military bases—and blockading the Strait of Hormuz, through which 30% of the world's oil exports pass. The closure of this global trade artery sent oil prices soaring from USD 70 to 100 a barrel within days; fertiliser prices—another 30% of which transits the strait—also rose sharply. Urea, one of the most widely used types of fertiliser, supplies nitrogen to the soil to increase crop productivity. In December 2025, its price was around USD 345 per tonne; by the end of March, it had practically doubled to USD 684 per tonne. Increases of this kind would pass inflation on to food prices, whether produced in the countries of the Horn of Africa or imported from elsewhere in the world.

Donald Trump, the US President, announced that his Government would support the escorting of oil tankers; several wealthy nations pledged to release 400 million barrels from their strategic reserves. Prices continued to climb, and the new Ayatollah, Mojtaba Khamenei—son of the late Supreme Leader—declared that the Strait of Hormuz would remain closed. The Bab el-Mandeb

Strait, the gateway for shipping heading towards the Suez Canal, emerged as another potential flashpoint. If it were closed or its traffic disrupted, the connection between Asia and Europe would be forced into a lengthy detour around South Africa.

Somaliland's *rapprochement* with Israel was the latest chapter in a long history of how countries in the Horn of Africa have leveraged their geostrategic position to secure investment and loans from partners in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, or Qatar. The tightening noose around Iran suddenly turned this overture into a risk: Djibouti hosts a US military base; Somaliland maintains close ties with both Israel and the UAE, a country repeatedly threatened by Tehran since late February. What once seemed a historic opportunity, in a now-heated climate, has become a potential source of problems.

At the time of writing, Ethiopia is beginning to experience fuel shortages: 76% of its supply comes from the UAE, Oman, and Kuwait. In Somalia, this is the worst possible time for an energy crisis impacting food prices: on 10 March, seventy NGOs warned of an imminent risk to the country's population:

'The latest Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) assessment indicates that around 6.5 million people in Somalia are projected to experience acute food insecurity between February and March - nearly double the number recorded at crisis levels in August 2025' (News Desk, 2026).

That's what a report in *Geeska*, a media outlet specialising in the Horn of Africa, explained. Speaking to *Bloomberg*, two officials from Somaliland -the region recognised by Israel- stated that the territory would allow Israel to gather intelligence and conduct operations against Yemen's Houthis, another Iran-backed group (Marks, 2026). Ethiopia's Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed; Somalia's President, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud; and Djibouti's President, Ismail Omar Guelleh, met in Djibouti on 12 March to discuss the potential regional repercussions of the Middle East conflict (Nigussie, 2026).

All major powers, both established and emerging, have a stake in East Africa, and this article aims to lay out the economic realities facing some of the region's countries. Factors ranging from debt and access to water, to agriculture, infrastructure, and industrialisation, will shape the region's future relationship with the rest of the world. External powers often turn their attention to East

Africa to solve their own problems—typically civil conflicts, the presence of armed groups, and their potential impact on international maritime trade—, but no solution can be lasting unless it can positively influence the economic structures of the countries involved.

2 Why is the Horn of Africa important to the rest of the world?

When Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser decided to nationalize the Suez Canal, he likely did not suspect that this move, beyond Egyptian politics, signalled that the world had changed forever. Control of the Suez Canal and the company managing it had been a symbol of the Egyptian state's capitulation to the British in the late 19th century: indebted and without enough cotton to pay its debts, it decided to sell off its assets piecemeal to the United Kingdom, which ended up controlling the country shortly after. The French, who had contributed to the canal's construction, were shareholders from the start and remained so during the period of British control over Egypt.

On 26 July 1956, with Egypt an independent state, the military officer Nasser announced that Egypt wanted to regain control of the canal, overriding the British and French shareholders. Paris and London attempted a military manoeuvre to overthrow Nasser and reinstate their property rights, but Washington prevented it, fearing Nasser would align with the Soviets. A new power was commanding the world, the United States, above the old colonial empires that, after this episode, lost most of their possessions on the continent shortly thereafter. Nasser, after this victory, became the most recognized leader of the Arab world of his generation. For the United Kingdom and France, the Suez Canal had not only symbolic but also economic importance: it was the point through which oil flowed from the Middle East to Europe. A blockade of that flow meant rising energy prices, higher spending in dollars—with which they paid for oil imports—and higher inflation.

This episode, which symbolized postcolonial Europe's capitulation to new global leadership, resonates strongly in early 2026, as the United States demonstrates its military might globally, and Europe still fails to find its voice to try to counter Washington's unilateral advance. Almost seventy years later, the Suez Canal and the Red Sea remain of capital importance for global trade, as explained in a 2024 *Bloomberg* special (Nightingale, 2024): through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the entry point for ships

heading to the Suez Canal, over USD 2 trillion in goods passed in 2023. One in five cars, one in five containers, and 15% of petroleum products passed through this strait. In total, 8.7% of goods—by value—that move by sea pass through Bab el-Mandeb at some point. Only the Strait of Hormuz (11.1%) and the Strait of Malacca (23.7%) have a greater share.

In the same special, *Bloomberg* noted that Houthi attacks from Yemen had increased global maritime trade costs by forcing ships to detour around the Cape of Good Hope. It mentioned a notice from Maersk, the world's second-largest shipping company, informing its clients that its vessels were consuming '40% more fuel' per journey and that charter rates were 'three times higher than normal.' The post-Covid crisis, when shipping freight rates quintupled, transferred inflation to the West, which tried to control it with interest rate hikes by the European Central Bank and the Federal Reserve. These hikes, in turn, worsened the financial situation of the most indebted African countries. This example suffices to see the two-way street of shipping crises: a rise in freight prices translates, via the interest rates of rich countries, into debt crises for African countries that cannot refinance their loans.

The interconnectedness of global economies means fragility is transmitted as easily as goods circulate. That is why control of the Bab el-Mandeb area and the East African region is crucial for the global economy's security—energy, economic, and political. This is why Djibouti, a small country with just over a million inhabitants, hosts up to five bases from five different countries: China, Japan, the United States, France, and Italy. East Africa is the point where trade flows linking Asia with Europe via Africa converge. This has left an economic legacy in a region that, in recent decades, has shown signs of wanting a more active role: to stop being a transit space and become a generator of goods that can flow through these commercial arteries.

In 2024, following the estrangement from Russia after the invasion of Ukraine, the European Union was forced to find other suppliers of crude oil and gas. The combined bill for importing crude oil and liquefied natural gas exceeded USD 300 billion annually that same year. Imports from Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar make security in the Red Sea paramount for the stability of European industries. Although the United States has become a key partner in the energy field, the need to diversify partners in a changing global scenario forces a close look at the Middle East. That is why

Nasser's lesson remains a recurring spectre that returns every time there is instability in the Red Sea. That is why East Africa becomes, due to its location, a key point for the West, but especially for Europe.

3 COVID-19: the global stroke that struck the Horn of Africa

If fragility is transmitted as easily as goods circulate, the primary lesson in that regard came during the COVID-19 pandemic. The circulation of a coronavirus in late 2019 in Wuhan, a city in China, went from being an anecdote ignored for weeks to directing the lives of hundreds of millions of people for months.

Western governments, regardless of political ideology, combined policies from some or several of these options: total lockdown, partial lockdown, government aid to businesses, and subsidies to workers to compensate for part of their salaries. In East Africa, with very precarious health infrastructure and no fixed salaries for most of the population, economies could not use the same measures and had to face the pandemic shock by borrowing from international organizations.

A triple shock affected the African continent since the pandemic. A recession in consumer countries of raw materials generally induces fewer sales or lower prices for sellers of these raw materials. With more fragile economic situations, capital tends to flee African countries, precisely when they are most needed. This situation occurred in the 1980s and happened again starting in 2020. To some extent, the COVID crisis exposed the fragilities that had been accumulating during the previous decade on the African continent.

The third shock—and the definitive one—would come with post-pandemic inflation and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. The increase in freight prices was partly a consequence of the unusual economic shift due to lockdowns: initially, some factories stopped, expecting a recession and a period of lower demand; then, with the reopening of the economy after mass vaccination, all factories demanded products from the same suppliers, many of them in Asia. Demand exploded, and the price of maritime transport skyrocketed. There were supply shortages and more expensive transport, a fact that forced factories to pass those costs on to consumers. Without having yet recovered from that blow, came the Russian invasion of Ukraine: two major grain producers, with Moscow as one of the world's major producers of

oil and gas. Financial markets anticipated new bottlenecks and shortages in energy and food markets: wheat and gasoline prices soared in the weeks following the Russian invasion.

In few places did this triple shock hit as significantly as in Africa. Although *coups d'état* did not surge in East Africa as in other regions of the continent, external instability favoured the resurgence of old territorial rivalries. And it tested national budgets that, over time, would have to start rationing payments between medicine, food, and debt service. Global instability also began to stimulate the price of a commodity that would stand out above others as a safe-haven asset: gold.

4 Ethiopia: the end of the 'great run'?

Just a decade ago, Ethiopia was considered 'a growth miracle.' At that time, a World Bank blog highlighted that the country had grown at double digits between 2004 and 2014, with an average annual rate exceeding 10%. 'And what is more striking is that if Ethiopia sustains its current pace of growth, it will become a middle income country by 2025,' Lars Christian Moller (2025), the article's author, added. High public investment in infrastructure, led by an austere government with a coherent plan, was considered the main engine of growth.

Moller also noted that Ethiopia was growing without being an oil-rich economy. Thus, unlike other countries on the continent, its growth was not based exclusively on rising prices or increased oil production. However, the World Bank warned of the need to secure affordable financing to accompany that growth: 'The government cannot keep on borrowing externally at the current rapid pace for too long, especially since exports are not performing well'.

This development model aimed to place Ethiopia in global value chains like the textile industry. The main objective was to leverage its cheap labour to attract labour-intensive industries and, eventually, transform some of the country's raw materials for export. Starting in 2014, the creation of industrial parks accelerated, intending to attract foreign private sector investment to create jobs and favour technology transfer. The industrial parks—currently thirteen—were the spearhead of that strategy, with facilities spread across towns like Hawassa, Mekelle, or Bahir Dar, among others.

H&M, Decathlon, Inditex, or Primark are some of the brands that began working with Ethiopian suppliers. As part of AGOA, a US trade initiative allowing duty-free entry of African products, Ethiopia was on track to direct much of that production to the American market. Between 2014 and 2019, clothing exports multiplied nineteen fold: from USD 12 million in annual exports to USD 227 million annually.

To make this industrial growth possible, Ethiopia launched the project that was to definitively transform the national economy: a hydroelectric dam with a name matching its ambition. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) was financed largely with the savings of Ethiopians in the country and the diaspora. With a total cost of about USD 5 billion, it was conceived in the late 2000s, at the height of Ethiopia's industrial plans, and built between 2011 and 2023. By harnessing the Nile's water, Ethiopia sought to supply its citizens and nascent industry. With surplus electricity, Ethiopia could sell it to its neighbours, who would also benefit from the project.

The use of the Nile's water, however, put Ethiopia in the sights of Egypt, which needs this water for its agricultural production, with which it produces half of the country's wheat. When Ethiopia began constructing the dam, Egypt was immersed in the Arab Spring. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi himself pointed out years later that if Egypt had not had those internal problems then, it would never have allowed the start of construction (Morsy, 2019). As the dam was being built, promising to be a catalyst for the Ethiopian economy, exports continued to increase: between 2011 and 2019, they rose from USD 2.29 billion to USD 3.43 billion. In this upward growth, there were three warning signs: most sales were still of unprocessed agricultural products—led by coffee—and imports still exceeded revenues by five times. Loans from the World Bank, China, and bondholders had made it possible to reach 2019 with a growing economy and new infrastructure, but a question loomed on the horizon: what would happen if financing stopped coming or came at higher interest rates? The answers began to arrive thanks to global turbulence.

Ethiopia's fragile national construction was exposed during the COVID year. In November 2020, the Ethiopian Government and the Tigray rebel forces began a conflict that lasted two years. After over 100,000 dead and 2.75 million internally displaced people, hostilities ceased, leaving reconstruction costs of around USD 20 billion. The war also led to the suspension of the AGOA

agreement with the United States: as punishment for atrocities committed during the conflict, Washington stopped applying favourable treatment to Ethiopian goods as of January 2022. Months later, the Addis Ababa government made peace with the rebels, but along the way lost export revenues that never recovered, not even after the peace signed in November 2022. In 2024, clothing exports were USD 165 million, 40% less than in 2021.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who came to power as a peacemaker with Eritrea and presiding over a promising economy, ultimately found himself leading the country through a devastating internal war as its economic situation deteriorated. The food inflation triggered by the Ukraine war in 2022 stretched the state's dollar reserves to breaking point, culminating in a default on a USD 1 billion Eurobond in December 2023. This marked the end of a path that led to an IMF loan the following summer and a devaluation of the local currency, the birr, which slumped from around 58 to the dollar in mid-July to over 100 to the dollar just weeks later. Since 2023, the Ethiopian state has been in negotiations with its creditors; it reached an agreement with bilateral creditor nations in the summer of 2025, and a preliminary deal with bondholders in early January 2026.

Ethiopia defaulted in December 2023 when it missed an interest payment on its sole international bond: a USD 1 billion loan issued in 2014 with a 6.625% coupon. The funds had been used for transport and energy infrastructure, industrial parks, and to revitalise the sugar industry. It was structured as a 'bullet' bond: interest was paid annually over ten years, with the full USD 1 billion principal due at maturity. By missing an interest payment, Ethiopia signalled to the international market its inability to pay. Since then, the East African nation has adhered to the G20's Common Framework for debt treatment.

Established in 2020, this mechanism stipulates that a country in default must provide equal treatment to all its creditors, or reach agreements backed by a majority. The framework exists precisely to prevent creditor disputes if, for example, Ethiopia were to stop paying bondholders—a private creditor—while using the saved funds to continue servicing its debts to China, a bilateral creditor. A multilateral creditor, in this case the International Monetary Fund (IMF), has been key to restructuring a process that risked stalling the country. With a severe dollar liquidity crunch and financing problems—for who would lend to a debtor

with outstanding obligations who has just announced a partial default?—Ethiopia signed a USD 3.4 billion credit facility with the IMF in the summer of 2024.

Harsh austerity measures, together with currency devaluation, are intended to restore investor confidence and stimulate Ethiopia's economic growth, thereby facilitating access to new bilateral and private financing. The IMF programme began in late July 2024 and will run until 2028. That same summer, the country secured a reduction in bilateral debt payments worth approximately USD 3.5 billion, as announced by the Ethiopian Government via the Finance Ministry's (2025) website.

The agreement with bondholders, announced in the financial press in early January, hinges largely on two commodities: coffee and gold. A recurring complaint from private investors since Ethiopia's default was that the country did, in fact, have sufficient means to service its debt. The bond's terms stipulated two annual payments of USD 33 million, paid semi-annually. The missed payment in December, a prelude to the USD 1 billion principal default the following year, occurred just as global prices for gold and coffee began to soar.

The rise in the gold price, a trend continuing into early 2026, is one consequence of geopolitical instability. As uncertainty pervades the global economy, states, investment funds, and individuals buy gold as a safe-haven asset. When Ethiopia defaulted on its Eurobond, the international gold price was USD 2,000 per ounce. By January 2026, the price had more than doubled, surpassing USD 4,500 per ounce.

Coffee, historically Ethiopia's great export, has followed a similar trajectory. The ravages of climate change and droughts in other producing countries, coupled with demand from traditional markets—Europe and the United States—and the consolidation of new sources of demand—China—have driven up the price of coffee, both for Robusta (used in capsules) and the higher-quality Arabica variety, which predominates in Ethiopia. In the latter case, coffee exceeded USD 9 per kilo in February 2025, nearly double its price when Ethiopia defaulted in December 2023.

Mentioning these two commodities, private investors argued that Ethiopia had sufficient means to meet its obligations. The agreement with them, signed in early 2026, addresses these concerns while also providing a potentially useful framework for debt restructurings elsewhere on the continent. On one hand, Ethiopia

secured a 15% 'haircut' on the principal. Instead of repaying the USD 1 billion it borrowed in 2014, it will pay USD 850 million; and instead of a 6.6% interest rate, it will pay 6.125%. Repayments are extended to 2029, but instead of waiting until then to repay the principal, Ethiopia will make a lump-sum payment of USD 350 million in July 2026, followed by another USD 350 million two years later.

The agreement stipulates the possibility—until 2037—for investors to earn up to an extra USD 180 million if the value of Ethiopia's exports continues to rise and exceeds expectations. Conversely, they could lose USD 100 million from the final principal payment in 2029 if Ethiopia's exports fall below a threshold determined by the IMF. This agreement compels lenders to account for the country's trade balance situation: rather than expecting repayment regardless of the debtor's circumstances, this type of pact fosters shared incentives between creditors and debtors. If coffee and gold prices rise and the Ethiopian economy grows, lenders will receive more; if the situation worsens, they will receive less.

For now, rising gold and coffee prices have opened a window of opportunity for the Ethiopian economy. Increased export earnings have helped boost international dollar reserves, crucial for maintaining import levels and currency stability. As indicated in the IMF's country report, published on 15 July 2025, barely a year after the programme began:

'Initial steps have been taken on an important revenue mobilization initiative, and significant progress has been made on debt restructuring and restoring its sustainability. Macroeconomic indicators have performed better than expected, with substantially better-than-envisaged outcomes on inflation, goods exports, international reserves, and high-frequency indicators, pointing to strong growth for this year.'

The same report, however, points to several risk factors that remain present, even within this window of opportunity for the Ethiopian economy. Although the IMF forecasts growth of around 7% for 2026, exports remain undiversified and overly concentrated in low-value-added agricultural goods, and gold. The former group is susceptible to any shock caused by a natural

disaster, drought, or downward price movement. In the case of coffee, if one examines the historical price chart for this commodity (Chart 1), it becomes clear that high prices never last long. As an agricultural crop with low barriers to entry, high prices incentivise millions of farmers worldwide to plant coffee to capitalise on them. If demand remains stable and supply increases considerably, this pushes prices down again.



Figura 1. Mapa físico del Cuerno de África. Fuente: commons.wikimedia.org/

In the case of gold, geopolitical instability and the ongoing trade war suggest high prices will continue in the short term. However, the IMF adds that, in this instance, the sudden increase in exports is due to 'higher production from artisanal miners' and a 'drawdown in inventories.' As this inventory drawdown cannot be sustained permanently, this highlights the risk of relying on gold as a primary source of income: any reduction in volume will test the resilience of the Ethiopian economy. The combination of the pandemic, the suspension of the US export agreement, and the shortage of hard currency have weakened the manufacturing sector, precisely the sector the government intended to stimulate before the crisis that forced it to borrow from the IMF. Its share of exports has fallen from 13.5% in the 2018-2019 cycle to just 4% in the first nine months of the 2024-2025 cycle.

The export vigour of gold and coffee has, in the short term, begun to achieve one of the government's objectives: increasing dollar reserves. Prior to the IMF bailout in 2023, they barely exceeded USD 1 billion, equivalent to just over 0.6 months of imports. By 2025, they had approached USD 3.8 billion, equivalent

to 1.7 months of imports. The IMF's safety threshold is around three months; the target under this assistance programme is to reach 3.5 months. This reserve safety buffer serves to reinforce the primary objective, identified as the Achilles' heel of the Ethiopian economy for over a decade: how to secure the financing necessary to make an economic leap that enables development in the country.

International aid, in free fall following the suspension of USAID, will represent an additional challenge for the Ethiopian economy, although the weight of Official Development Assistance (ODA) has been declining as the country's economy has grown. Whereas in 2011 ODA accounted for 12% of GDP, by 2023 it represented barely 4%. Most existing ODA is devoted to humanitarian assistance, aimed at mitigating the consequences of conflict and climate shocks: to the 4.4 million internally displaced people, the one million displaced by conflicts in Sudan and South Sudan must be added. This latter figure is perhaps the greatest unresolved challenge of Ethiopia's developmental model: in 2024, 21.4 million people—one fifth of the population—required humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs.

Ethiopia faces problems similar to those encountered by most countries that have attempted an industrialisation process. Activities such as garment manufacturing or raw material processing require significant investment in imported machinery. In the short term, this leads to a negative trade balance, as expenditure exceeds income. This gap is usually covered either through external borrowing—denominated in dollars—or by increasing government revenues through domestic taxation. If results do not materialise in time and the sought-after productivity leap fails to occur, dollar reserves are depleted and the country is forced to seek a bailout from a multilateral institution such as the IMF, the lender of last resort in such cases.

For Ethiopia, two major questions remain unresolved: how the country can relaunch its industrial parks in the aftermath of war and the pandemic; and how electricity generated by the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam will contribute to the development of these industries. After a period of growth driven by infrastructure investment and a private sector steered and supported by the state, the adjustment programme will place greater emphasis on privatisation and the attraction of foreign investors. Time will tell whether these investors are capable of transferring technology and helping Ethiopia move up the value chain, or whether, on

the contrary, they become rent-seeking actors who exploit market power to set prices and repatriate profits. Ethiopia's stability, with potential confrontations involving Tigray and Eritrea, will be the other major factor that either enables or hinders any chance of economic success. At the time of writing, tensions between these territories are on the rise. Addis Ababa prioritises total control over its territory without internal contestation—against Tigray— and natural access to the sea—in relation to its neighbouring countries. The Gulf powers and Egypt are keeping a close eye on this standoff, with one eye on the resolution of the civil war in Sudan and the other on the Red Sea. Rising petrol prices and fuel shortages, triggered by the conflict in Iran, are further complicating the short-term outlook for the Horn of Africa giant. With 132 million people living in the country, the stability of both Ethiopia and its neighbours will largely depend on the government's forthcoming decisions.

5 China: new funding of an emerging economy

China's economic transformation began, intellectually, with a story about two cats, articulated in the 1960s (Zheng y Sun, 2011). Deng Xiaoping, who spent years marginalised and ostracised during the harshest period of Maoism, continued to defend this idea when he became China's paramount leader in 1978. Following the economic failure of the Great Leap Forward, Deng announced his pragmatism with the now-famous phrase: 'It doesn't matter whether the cat is black or white; if it catches mice, it is a good cat.' With this statement, Deng signalled that political institutions—in this case, the Communist Party of China—could employ market-economy tools to achieve China's economic development. Prior to his rise to power, such ideas had been considered virtually sacrilegious during the era of central planning.

Deng led the People's Republic of China between 1978 and 1989, but his ideas were passed on to subsequent leaders. This marked the beginning of a policy that transformed China into the world's second-largest economy through its model of 'market socialism': a blend of market mechanisms—featuring special economic zones with low taxes and cheap labour available to foreign firms—and state supervision or direct participation in the most strategic sectors of the economy. The Chinese example has generated considerable fascination across the African continent, where comparisons abound between China's economic situation at the time many

African countries gained independence. In the 1960s, Kenya's GDP per capita (USD 100) exceeded that of China (USD 89). China was only slightly ahead of newly independent countries such as Somalia (USD 62) or of countries that were never colonised, such as Ethiopia (USD 75) (World Bank, n.d.).

By 2024, the idea that a Somali might earn 70% of a Chinese citizen's GDP per capita seems remote. China's GDP per capita now exceeds USD 13,000 annually and is twenty times that of Somalia, eleven times that of Ethiopia and six times that of Kenya. China's export success is well known and has long aroused suspicion among its Western partners. When China joined the World Trade Organization in the early 2000s, American and European companies viewed it as an emerging market in which to sell their goods. Over time, however, an unexpected problem emerged: the Chinese market was increasingly filled with Chinese products. These were so competitive that the situation reversed. Today, it is Chinese companies that are steadily gaining ground in European and American markets, not only with cheap clothing or low-value products, but also with batteries, solar panels, electric vehicles and a wide range of manufactured goods.

The rise of Beijing's global influence, coupled with its economic confrontations—often successful—with the West, is among the factors that have elicited the greatest admiration in East Africa. Over the past two decades, leaders in countries such as Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Kenya have sought to move in a single direction: to seize the economic opportunities offered by China's rise. Deng Xiaoping's 'cat theory', embedded in China's economic governance, proved particularly appealing to countries that had spent the Cold War years under regimes aligned either with Washington or Moscow, sometimes oscillating unevenly between the two.

In the case of Ethiopia and Somalia, historic adversaries over control of the Ogaden region—inhabited largely by Somalis but part of Ethiopia—the conflict led Somalia's socialist regime under Siad Barre to draw closer to Washington during the 1980s. Ethiopia, meanwhile, was governed by another socialist regime led by Haile Mengistu Mariam, who, with Soviet backing, defeated Somalia in the Ogaden war. Mengistu had come to power in 1974 by deposing Emperor Haile Selassie, who had pursued a pro-American policy during his reign, even sending Ethiopian troops to the Korean War in 1953 (Korean War Memorials, n.d.). As Africans across the continent recognised that these ideological shifts had rarely produced tangible results—neither the

Somali nor Ethiopian regimes survived the end of the Cold War—, the emergence of a pragmatic actor able to move flexibly was widely perceived as a major opportunity. The 1990s, marked by a unipolar world dominated by the United States, left regional state financing largely in the hands of the IMF and the World Bank through structural adjustment programmes. China's rise in the early 2000s opened a new avenue for financing, allowing countries to diversify their sources.

For many countries, Chinese loans offered an escape from Western economic tutelage, and they were eager to seize it. According to Boston University (Global Development Policy Center, n.d.), between 2000 and 2023 China lent USD 182 billion to the African continent through its banks and institutions. Of this total, USD 14.5 billion went to Ethiopia, USD 9.6 billion to Kenya, USD 1.6 billion to Djibouti and USD 732 million to Eritrea. These loans were largely devoted to projects constructed by Chinese companies. Transport and energy were the primary focus of these investments, which often overlapped and aimed to promote regional integration. For instance, the railway linking Ethiopia and Djibouti provides landlocked Ethiopia with access to the sea, facilitating the export of manufactured goods. Infrastructure connecting the electricity generated by the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam to the capital, Addis Ababa, was financed by a USD 1 billion loan from the State Grid Corporation of China.

The boom in Chinese investment in Eastern Africa occurred particularly following the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. After Somalia joined the initiative in 2015, other countries in Eastern Africa also became participants. The project seeks to redraw global trade routes, positioning China as a new hub for the export of goods and high technology worldwide. Supported by a network of roads, ports and railways, these routes provided African countries with new markets for their products. In many cases, Chinese capital relocated production from China to other Belt and Road partners. In this way, China replicated abroad what the West had once done with China itself: exploiting large pools of cheap labour by shifting low value-added industries overseas. This allowed China to continue supplying its population with affordable goods while its economy increasingly focused on higher value-added sectors. In the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia became the clearest example of this process in the textile industry, while investment in Djibouti—the export gateway—was a direct consequence. In other East African countries such as Kenya, USD 3.6 billion were invested in

connecting the capital, Nairobi, to the port city of Mombasa, the country's maritime outlet.

The results of the increasingly dynamic relationship between countries in the region and Beijing are clearly reflected in their trade balances (Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.). In Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya and Djibouti, China is the leading country of origin for imported goods. In the one exception—Somalia—, China ranks second, behind the United Arab Emirates, which acts as a major commercial hub, in some cases, re-exporting Chinese products. Imports typically consist of manufactured goods, consumer products and machinery. Export destinations, by contrast, are more diversified: Somalia sells primarily to Middle Eastern countries; Djibouti to its neighbour Ethiopia; and Ethiopia to the United States, China and the Emirates. In Kenya, China does not feature among the top four export destinations, while only Eritrea shows a clear dependence on the Chinese market, to which it sells two thirds of its exports.

These trade links consequently generate a trade deficit for all the African countries involved: they buy more from China than they sell to China. Given the nature of the products exchanged—cheap raw materials in return for manufactured goods—, this pattern has yet to resolve the structural problems on the African side of the relationship. According to Chinese customs data (General Administrations of Customs of the People's Republic of China, n.d.), in 2025, for every dollar that the countries of the Horn of Africa sold to China, China sold 5.6 dollars' worth of goods in those African markets.

The promise of transforming this trade pattern through technology transfer and machinery remains unfulfilled, although the extensive infrastructure now in place represents a step in the right direction: there can be no industry or economic prosperity in energy-poor countries. The increase in electricity generation, particularly in Kenya and Ethiopia, provides the necessary foundations for improvement in the coming years both in the Horn of Africa and in East Africa. In 2023, Ethiopia generated 18.22 TWh of electricity, multiplying its output eleven fold compared with the year 2000. Almost all of this production (96%) came from hydro-power, and the operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam will further reinforce this trend in the years ahead. In Kenya, which started from a higher base, growth has been less dramatic than in Ethiopia, but the transformation in the energy mix has been significant. In 2023, Kenya produced 12.8 TWh of electricity, 80% of

which came from renewable sources (Ember Energy, 2026). Even so, one figure illustrates the gulf separating the countries of the region from a country such as Spain: in 2023, the combined electricity production of the Horn of Africa and Kenya (with a population of 204 million) amounted to 32.07 TWh, barely half of what Spain (49 million inhabitants) generated from wind power alone.

Infrastructure construction will create opportunities in the future but, in the short term, it has generated debt that must be repaid. Somalia has recently received debt relief covering the bulk of its obligations and has very limited exposure to Chinese credit, making it the exception to the regional rule. In Djibouti, the gateway for Ethiopian imports and exports, half of the country's debt is held by Chinese creditors. In Ethiopia and Kenya, the share of debt owed to China stands at 21% and 13% of the total, respectively (World Bank Group, n.d.).

With regard to external financing, three distinct groups can be identified in the region. The first, comprising Somalia and Eritrea, relies primarily on loans from multilateral institutions—in the case of Eritrea—or on an almost equal mix of multilateral and bilateral sources, as in the case of Somalia. Multilateral lenders—groups of countries operating through institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank or the Islamic Development Bank—typically offer concessional loans at low interest rates. By providing long-term financing, they are often best suited to the development needs of poorer countries. Their main drawback, however, is a loss of economic sovereignty: in exchange for funding, recipient countries must comply with a set of policy adjustments and conditions. Bilateral loans, which tend to carry higher interest rates, are more susceptible to transactional relationships shaped by the lender's strategic interests. In Somalia, bilateral lenders are primarily Gulf monarchies; in Eritrea, they include the former colonial power, Italy.

The second group consists of Djibouti, where bilateral loans (67%) already outweigh multilateral ones (33%). As noted earlier, the majority of these loans come from China, followed by Kuwait. The third group consists of Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa's largest economy, which has turned to private markets for borrowing. Accessing private sector loans—whether through Eurobonds or commercial bank credit—is typically seen as a significant step in a country's economic development.

If multilateral loans are associated with countries that have limited alternatives, and bilateral loans with state-to-state transactional

relationships, Eurobonds are seen as the most direct route to global financial markets. They come without policy conditions and do not require governments to implement specific reforms; instead, they demand that investors be convinced of the potential of the national economy. The trade-off is their very high interest rates. Ethiopia is the only country in the Horn of Africa to have taken this step. As in other African countries, the post-2008 decline in global interest rates fuelled lending to so-called 'emerging markets' at rates exceeding 6%, at a time when interest rates in Europe and the United States stood between 0% and 1%.

Following the 2020 pandemic, all countries in the region found themselves back at square one. Regardless of their level of development or the diversification of their funding sources, all experienced dollar shortages and—with the exception of Eritrea—turned to the IMF to resolve liquidity problems. Both China and private creditors were reluctant to extend new loans, leaving the IMF once again as the lender of last resort. Somalia and Ethiopia are currently under IMF programmes running until 2026 and 2028, respectively. Djibouti implemented a programme after the pandemic and currently has none in place. Although its debt-service payments relative to exports are low—around 3% (World Bank Group, 2025)—Djibouti views both the conflict in Iran and a possible rise of Somaliland as risks: two disruptions to its role as a hub for importing and exporting goods to and from the Horn of Africa. China has opened new, alternative financing channels for countries in the region, but the global financial system remains dominated in times of crisis by the Bretton Woods institutions. The IMF's capital base—USD 1.3 trillion (International Monetary Fund, n.d.)—is thirteen times larger than that of the New Development Bank (USD 100 billion) (New Development Bank, n.d.), the BRICS bank that seeks to position itself as a reference point for emerging economies. This contrast perhaps best encapsulates a new world that is being announced but has yet to fully arrive. As countries navigate the search for financing, some have already found another way to inject dollars into their economies: by 'exporting' their people to countries where they can earn higher wages and send part of that income back home.

6 The diaspora, the country of migrants

For Somalis, the emergence of the diaspora has been a mechanism of survival. Beyond economically motivated migration, many were

forced to leave the country following the *de facto* collapse of the state in the early 1990s. As Mohamed Muhamud, author of *Somali Sideways*, a book on the Somali diaspora, recalls, Somalis have travelled the world for centuries. However, the modern history of the Somali diaspora is tied to what Somalis refer to as 'Burburka', the destruction of the state after a turbulent decade. As insurgent groups gradually gained ground against the Central Government, and following a failed United States intervention, Somalia became fertile ground for armed groups, warlords and, ultimately, Islamist movements. 'In the early 1990s, when the war began, the global Somali diaspora numbered fewer than one million people—estimates place it at around 850,000. By 2015, that figure had grown to two million,' Muhamud (2024) explains at *Geeska*.

The Somali diaspora has settled in destinations similar to those chosen by Kenyans, with the addition of Scandinavian countries—owing to their refugee reception policies—and Kenya itself, Somalia's neighbour, which hosts a sizeable community in Eastleigh. Across Eastern Africa—and across the continent more broadly—remittances tend to compensate for shortcomings in state-provided services. In Somalia, however, the situation is even more far-reaching: these funds must effectively replace a largely non-existent state, as Muhamud notes:

'Statelessness has forced Somalis abroad to become the social safety net for relatives and friends back home. This shared commitment reflects a strong pledge within the closely knit structure of Somali society, where, despite the physical distances separating them, family and community ties remain robust.'

In 2024, official remittances amounted to USD 1.2 billion, equivalent to 17% of Somalia's GDP. Among the businesses established by the Somali diaspora—beyond investments in real estate, trade or food distribution—are precisely the apps that enable remittances to be sent home easily and affordably (Featherstone, 2017).

In both Ethiopia and Somalia, a share of remittances flows through informal systems such as *hawala*, which allow senders to bypass the high costs of formal transfers. In Ethiopia, although the 2024 volume was more modest—around USD 500 million—remittances remain one of the country's main sources of income, behind only coffee and gold. In 2015, when the International Monetary Fund (2015) assessed Ethiopia's debt sustainability, it included

remittances as a key factor in evaluating the state's repayment capacity. In Djibouti, remittances amounted to USD 56 million in 2024, while for Eritrea no official data are available from the World Bank.

Across the region, remittances have so far acted as a buffer against crises and external shocks. As noted earlier, family and emotional ties between migrants and those who remain behind make these flows 'counter-cyclical', at times even moving against the economic cycle of the host countries where migrants work. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when many economies shut down, the logical expectation was a decline in remittances: Somali or Kenyan workers who lost their jobs or saw their incomes reduced would presumably send less money home. Indeed, many of them are employed in the most precarious segments of their host economies. Yet reality defied this intuition: between 2020 and 2021, remittance flows increased in both cases. Given the regularity of these flows, a question remains: what if remittances could be used to purchase diaspora bonds and secure more affordable financing for countries of origin? As will be discussed below, debt interest payments are one of the major concerns in several countries across the region.

7 The currency dance: debt, the dollar and the pull effect

In December 2023, Somalia secured a lifeline for its economy. After meeting the requirements of the HIPC initiative (Heavily Indebted Poor Countries), Somalia obtained debt relief amounting to USD 4.5 billion (International Monetary Fund, 2023). Following the announcement, the IMF stated on its website that this step would reduce external debt from 64% of Somalia's GDP in 2018 to just 6% in 2023. According to the same institution, debt relief will 'facilitate access to critical additional financial resources that will help Somalia strengthen its economy, reduce poverty, and promote job creation.'

In December 2025, however, a letter sent to IMF (2025) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva by Somalia's Minister of Finance, Bihi Iman Egeh, and the Governor of the Central Bank, Abdirahman Abdullahi, presented a less encouraging picture. The reduction in international aid flows had put some humanitarian assistance programmes for the Somali population at risk. The country's fiscal authorities added that, despite the progress achieved through debt reduction, Somalia was not generating sufficient

employment for its young population. Economic pressures were compounded by climate change risks and persistent insecurity linked to the activities of the Al-Shabaab militia. According to IMF projections, the country's merchandise trade deficit will stand at around USD 7 billion in 2026 and continue to widen, exceeding USD 9 billion by 2030. Livestock accounts for half of Somalia's exports, and the country will struggle to diversify its income sources as long as it lacks full control over its territory.

For countries in the region, debt accumulation is a direct consequence of economies centred on the export of raw materials that, in most cases, remain unprocessed. Kenya and Ethiopia compete to export coffee to countries such as Switzerland, which then process and resell it at prices that, according to Comtrade data, can be up to six times higher than the cost of the raw product. When these processed goods are imported back at higher prices, the resulting deficit is financed through borrowing.

The decade between 2010 and 2020 saw a substantial increase in the debt stock across all countries in the region: collectively, it rose from USD 21 billion to more than USD 78 billion. Eritrea and Djibouti account for only a small share, and in Eritrea's case access to international markets is severely limited by political isolation. Somalia, meanwhile, saw its debt reduced, while the largest debt burdens are concentrated in Ethiopia and Kenya, both of which will face rising debt repayments until 2032. Ethiopia has already restructured part of its debt; Kenya has resorted to new borrowing at interest rates of around 10%, temporarily easing the pressure, or postponing the problem to be dealt with later (Chart 2). In 2024, Kenya devoted 27% of its export revenues to debt servicing, and repayments will remain high until 2030. Any reduction—whether in volume or price—of its exports would generate turbulence in the Kenyan economy and send reverberations across the Horn of Africa: for instance, if Somalis living in Kenya lose their jobs or are forced to leave the country, or if Ethiopian coffee loses market share because Kenyan coffee is cheaper.

The financing problem is a vicious circle. The more economically developed states in the region are able to access private markets, but they do so at interest rates that consume a significant share of public budgets, especially once it becomes clear that their economies remain trapped in low value-added activities. To return to square one, they devalue their currencies, making labour and exports cheaper in an attempt to remain competitive in international markets, while continuing to sell raw materials

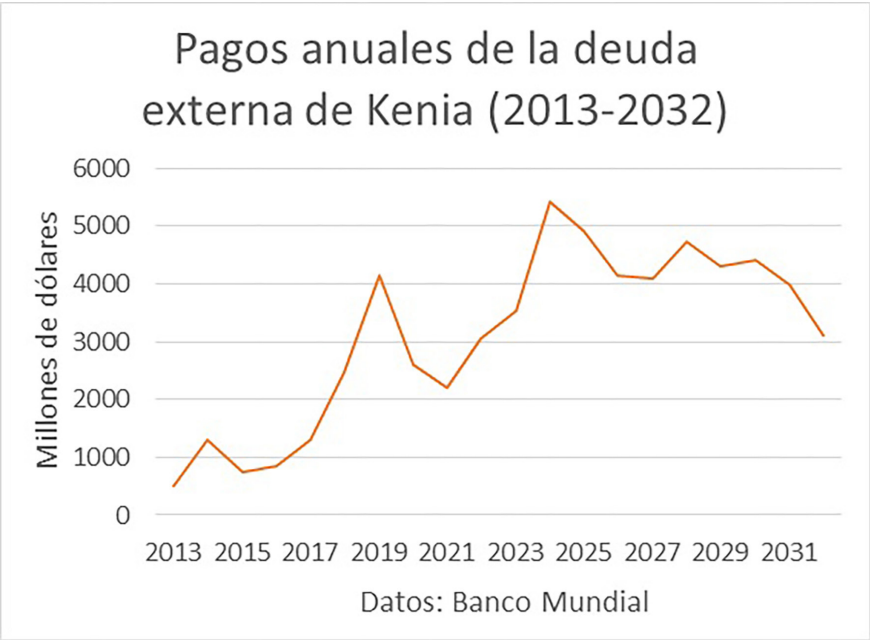


Figura 2. Bloques de intereses en el Cuerno de África. Fuente: criticalthreats.org

that generate wealth abroad once processed. Trade deficits then force them back into debt, once they regain access to private markets, often after implementing reforms supported by multilateral institutions. Along the way, their populations are not willing to wait: every currency devaluation fuels migration. Each devaluation reinforces a stark reality: if someone from Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia, or Ethiopia earns their salary in dollars, euros, or pounds, their money will go much further when converted into their home currency. This will drive migration, whether state-sponsored or uninvited, as in the case of undocumented migrants attempting to reach Europe or the Middle East.

These migration flows, often viewed by countries in the Global North as a threat, may in fact hold a potentially beneficial solution for both host and home nations. One opportunity shared by the financial system and the states involved is to capture the flow of remittances that currently go undeclared. Another is to reduce transfer costs, which in Africa are among the highest in the world. Whoever manages to do this will tap into a growing market. For the states concerned, capturing a portion of diaspora funds has the potential to reduce both their borrowing needs and the Interest payments on that debt. Between 2013 and 2032,

Kenya and Ethiopia alone will spend 10 billion dollars on interest paid to private investors. By reinvesting that money into manufacturing coffee, or providing electricity to their populations, both countries would generate positive economic ripple effects—greater agricultural output, more jobs, reduced spending on food imports—that would ultimately benefit their own people and all neighbouring countries across the Horn of Africa and East Africa. Ethiopia, with its hydroelectric dam, is the clearest example of what can be achieved by mobilising this capital. Paradoxically, it is migrants who may generate opportunities for their countries of origin, precisely the opportunities they themselves were denied.

8 Conclusion

In late March, the escalation in Iran highlighted the growing interconnectedness of our societies. What happens thousands of kilometres away translates into nearly instantaneous price increases at gas stations, supermarkets, and shops around the world. All territories are, to a certain extent, transmitters and receivers of signals that are transmitted, especially, through the economy. The Horn of Africa is no stranger to this reality. As these lines are written, livestock exports from Somalia have suffered a significant blow: instability in the Middle East, where its main buyers are located, has reduced Somali sales volumes.

All the countries in the region need a return to peace, for different reasons. Djibouti, in order to remain a place where goods circulate smoothly and without friction: if import and export volumes from the region decline, its business model will be affected. Somalia, to face the multitude of challenges ahead: a drier climate, lack of security, and a potential breakup of part of the state. It does so with the 'blank slate' that its debt reduction represents. Somaliland is the only territory experiencing the geopolitical tremors as an opportunity: after three decades of working to build a state, it has received its first recognition, and hopes to translate its importance into a state status finally recognized by many more countries. The rise in violence, however, is a double-edged sword: gaining status could end up meaning becoming part of a large-scale conflict that derails Somaliland's entire strategy, whose main asset has been, precisely, peace within its territory.

Eritrea and Ethiopia, at odds for six decades, first in a thirty-year war of independence (1961-1991), then in unresolved skirmishes

over their territorial borders and sphere of influence, observe the situation in Iran as both countries relive another military escalation. Their economic contradictions, once again, can be interpreted in two completely opposite ways: they can serve as an incentive to fuel a conflict with nationalist roots, but also as a call for restraint to prioritize resolving internal problems. Ethiopia's decisions, as it recovers from a financial blow and hopes to revive its economy, will influence the entire Horn of Africa. Addis Ababa is focused on securing an outlet to the sea to revitalize its economic growth. The response to that need, along with the operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, will shape the future of the Horn of Africa. For the Spanish or European reader, it may seem like an arcane and distant issue, but as the world is already showing us in the spring of 2026, ignoring it is a risk that cannot be afforded.

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Chapter Six

History of trade routes in the Horn of Africa

Worku Derara

Abstract

The Horn of Africa, comprising the modern states of Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia, is an important region from the point of view of international relations. It is located at the confluence of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the western Indian Ocean. The Horn of Africa has experienced the evolution of international trade networks from ancient times to the present. Archaeological and literary sources are available for the role of the region in international commerce. *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, the ancient Greek travel and trade manual from the 1st century AD, mentions the Adulis trade center in the contemporary area of Zula, Eritrea, as a 'port established by law' (a *nomimon emporion*). This port was the chief maritime outlet of the Kingdom of Aksum until the 7th century. The strategic trade centres and the trade routes in the interior have all played an important role in the trade history of this region. The ports of Xiis (Heis), Opone (Hafun), and Avalites (Zeila) have all been significant centres in the Indo-Roman trade history, as indicated by the findings of amphorae, glasses, coins, and other imports from South Arabia. The inland centres, such as Harlaa in Eastern

Ethiopia, have also played an important role as redistribution centres, facilitating the movement of imported commodities into the interior. The nomadic herders have also played an important role as middlemen who controlled access to water and pastures. The spread of Islam has also facilitated the integration of this region into the long-distance trade routes with its unique system of law and religion, which has helped in facilitating business transactions in this region. The trade routes in this part of Africa have experienced a period of unrest due to various political and military conflicts in this region. Besides historical records, there are various archaeological findings that have shed light on this subject.

Keywords

Trade routes, Maritime commerce, Caravan networks, Nomadic herders, Indo-Roman trade

1 Introduction

The Horn of Africa is a geopolitically important region that includes Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Djibouti. It is situated where the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Western Indian Ocean meet (Figure 1). Historically, this area has served as a crossroads connecting Africa, Arabia, and Asia, facilitating the transfer of goods, people, and ideas (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2021; Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022). The Horn of Africa has actively participated in regional and interregional trade networks, which have significantly shaped the economic, cultural, and political landscape of the area and beyond.

Historical records and archaeological findings show that trade in the Horn of Africa has been ongoing since at least the 1st century AD. For instance, the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a Greek sailing guide from the 1st century AD, detailed sailing routes, traded commodities, and ports across the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Indian Ocean (Casson, 1989). It indicates that the Kingdom of Aksum traded ivory and other goods from the African interior to ports like Cyeneum near what is now Asab, and to Adulis and Avalites (Zeila) on the Red Sea.

On the other side of the region, ports such as Xiis (Heis), Opone (Hafun), and Avalites (Zeila), connected to the Red Sea-Indian Ocean trade network, served as key points for economic exchanges with the Roman Mediterranean, South Arabia, and India (Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022; Huntingford and Chittick, 1989). These ports acted as major hubs on long-distance trade routes where goods such as amphorae, glass containers, beads, coins, and ceramics were imported. Inland settlements like Harlaa in eastern Ethiopia utilized routes passing through dry lowlands and river valleys, leveraging the knowledge and mobility of nomadic pastoral groups to distribute goods (Torres, 2022; González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2025).

In addition, there was an incentive to extend trade connections with the advent of Islam in the 7th century. During this period, the Horn established trade connections with Persia, India, the Maldives, and East Africa in the Indian Ocean trade (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, there were various dynamics in the region, including local conflicts, which impacted trade. For instance, trade routes had to be adjusted periodically (González-Ruibal, 2023).

Drawing on archaeological, historical, and ethnographic information, this chapter seeks to explore the history of trade routes in the Horn of Africa. It aims to illustrate how certain crucial factors enabled the Horn to participate in trade activities from ancient to modern times.

2 Geographic and environmental context

The Horn of Africa is a geographically significant area that connects the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Western Indian Ocean (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2021). Its unique landscape includes plains, arid lowlands, river valleys, and highland plateaus. These variations in geography and environment have given rise to unique zones of ecology, which have impacted the settlement and movement of people and the formation of commercial routes over the centuries (Insoll, 2021). The plains in the Horn of Africa have served as natural docking stations for maritime trade, while the valleys and highlands have served as the commercial centres for imported goods (Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022).



Figure 1. Location map of the Horn of Africa (© Rainer Lesniewski, 2025)

The monsoon rains allowed for dependable navigation of sea routes between Somalia and Arabia. This was because the rains were seasonal, enabling traders to plan maritime routes with confidence (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2021). Meanwhile, land routes were generally affected by the availability of water, pasture, and accessible pathways. Caravans typically travelled through valleys, wells, and grazing areas. These routes were guided by the knowledge of nomadic herders, who controlled access to key resources (Torres, 2022; González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2025). The availability of these essential resources also played a role in establishing trade centres.

The various terrains in the Horn region also affect the movement of goods and people. The mountain ranges in the region, for example, provide routes for transporting goods, while the desert and semi-arid areas in the Horn require strategic planning. The coastal regions and natural harbours of the Horn of Africa connect it to long-distance trade routes that link the region to South Arabia, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean (González-Ruibal, 2023).

The subsequent parts of the chapter will present the historical development of trade routes in the Horn of Africa, with special emphasis on the roles of geography, environment, and politics in shaping these routes from ancient times to the present. The study shows the long-term connections between the historical trade networks and the contemporary economic networks in the region.

3 Trade networks in Antiquity

Between the 1st and the 3rd century AD, the Horn of Africa was a major participant in both maritime and inland trade networks, promoting economic and cultural exchange across Afro-Eurasia (Seland, 2014). Both archaeological and historical data reveal that the integration of coastal regions and inland settlements in the region into these maritime and inland trade networks had taken place before the rise of Islamic maritime trade (Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022).

The Horn of Africa has played a very important role in the commerce and economy of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean during Antiquity. The ports along the coast in modern-day Eritrea and Djibouti were significant gateways linking the Ethiopian highlands to the markets in Arabia, the Mediterranean region, and India. The port city of Adulis was one of the major commercial hubs through

which goods from the highlands were exported to the international market (Figure 2). The items of trade exported from this region of Africa comprised ivory, gold, rhino horn, animal hides, incense, and slaves, while the imported goods were cloth, glass, metals, ceramics, and spices from Arabia, the Mediterranean region, and India (Casson, 1989; Munro-Hay, 1991).

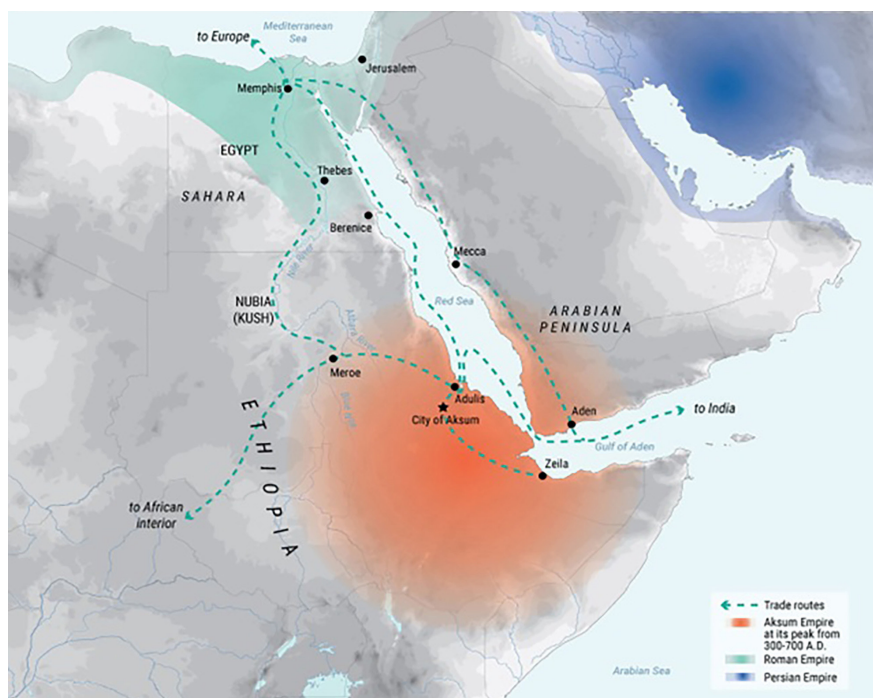


Figure 2. The Aksumite port of Adulis in the Red Sea (© Geopolitical Futures, 2018)

During the Kingdom of Aksum, the commercial activities in the Horn of Africa were greatly expanded. Commodities were moved by the state, local, and foreign merchants from Arabia and the Mediterranean region (Phillipson, 2012; Hatke, 2013).

Archaeological and historical research suggests that ports on the Red Sea corridor/Gulf of Aden facilitated the integration of the Horn of Africa with the wider Red Sea/Indian Ocean trade systems (Fattovich, 2010; Power, 2012).

Some of the most valuable sources of information about the early maritime trade of the Horn of Africa come from the coastal settlement of Xiis (Heis) in Eastern Somalia. The sources of archaeological excavations and

surveys have shown that the region was connected to various parts of the world through trade.

This has been supported by imported Roman and Parthian pottery, glasses, and South Arabian ware dating to the 1st-3rd centuries AD (Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022). The mentioned categories of sources, particularly imported goods, indicate a high level of trade activity instead of sporadic contacts. Imported goods were carried to the region, then to another country, via sea routes that connected the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, and the Mediterranean via the region's ports, including Xiis, Mundus, Zeila, and Berbera (Seland, 2014).

The ancient ports of the coastal region, such as Opone, or modern Hafun, have been very important in the history of the early Indian Ocean trade. The presence of material evidence has confirmed their involvement in the Mediterranean world, including Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Persian partners (Huntingford and Chittick, 1989).

Likewise, the excavations conducted at Xiis have shown the involvement of these ports in long-distance trade through the presence of imported ceramics.

4 Inland trade routes in the Horn of Africa

The inland routes of the Horn of Africa traversed the deserts, semi-arid plains, and highland valleys. They helped in the movement of various commodities of trade, such as livestock, ivory, salt, cereals, among many others (Woldekiros, 2014). Archaeological findings indicate that the trade routes of the Horn of Africa, known as the caravan trade routes, were close to places with water resources, hence an important feature in trade (Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022).

Nomadic pastoral communities in the Horn not only served as an intermediary in trade between inland and coastal markets, but also provided pack animals and guided traders across harsh environments (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2022; Woldekiros, 2014).

On the other hand, local social structures helped to control access to major resources and expedited collaboration among stakeholders in trade. There was integration of the inland production zones in the Horn and the inter-regional trade networks, which included the Incense Trade Route, into international markets.

Natural resins such as frankincense and myrrh from Southern Arabia, Ethiopia, and Somalia were carried by caravans to

the ports for further transportation via the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean exchange networks (Ben-Yehoshua *et al.*, 2012).

Both archaeological and historical data are evident that the trade routes enabled the exchange of various commodities such as ivory, gold, tortoiseshell, and textiles, which formed a complex economic network that involved the exchange of foreign goods (Schneider, 2018).

This interaction between maritime and inland networks enabled the Horn of Africa to be vigorously involved in international trade. Overland trade routes were used to transport local products such as livestock, frankincense, and ivory to the trading centres along the coast, where they were traded for other foreign products such as ceramics, glassware, textiles, and metalwork (Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022). This exchange of goods promoted inter-regional exchange, which was carried inland (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2022).

While maritime trade opened the gates for the connection of the Horn to distant lands, caravan routes connected the ports on the coast to the hinterland. The ports on the Gulf of Aden, such as Zeila, Berbera, and Bulhar, became gateways linking the trade routes to the Ethiopian highlands and inland settlements.

Northern Somaliland was the transit region where the seasonal towns of caravans and exchange fairs took place at critical constrictions. This facilitated interaction among herders, coastal communities, and inland urban centres (Torres, 2022).

Caravan routes were flexible and tended to follow areas with water and pasture rather than fixed roads. Archaeological features that help identify these routes include wells, campsites, and cairns (Insoll, 2021).

Historical and archaeological studies also indicate that trade routes could change in response to political turmoil, aridity, or other environmental pressures (Seland, 2014; Woldekiros, 2014).

5 Socio-economic and cultural implications

Trade in the Horn of Africa has significant economic, social, and cultural implications. From the economic point of view, it ensured the flow of materials, ideas, and techniques from and to the region, particularly between Africa and Eurasia. In addition, nomadic herders served as middlemen in the process.

This, in turn, affected the formation of settlements, movements, and alliances between nomadic communities (Torres, 2022). Moreover, trade in the region reinforced the region's participation in international trade, hence assuring participation in the overall maritime economy.

Between the 1st and the 3rd centuries AD, the Horn of Africa actively engaged in practicing both maritime and inland trade. In the process, coastal ports and caravan trade routes served as complementary channels of trade.

The involvement of the region in these trade networks shows an economic system characterized by the supply of locally produced goods, the intermediary role of herders, and international exchange. These trade connections have shaped the region's social, economic, and cultural landscapes throughout the subsequent centuries (Ben-Yehoshua *et al.*, 2012; Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022; González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2022; Schneider, 2018; Seland, 2014; Woldekiros, 2014).

6 Nomadic herders as intermediaries in trade

The nomadic herders of the Horn of Africa actively facilitated trade between the Red Sea region and the Gulf of Aden region and countries like Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia. While major ports, like Adulis, Zeila, and Berbera, played a significant role in the trade between these countries, they also played a critical role in the movement of goods between inland and coastal areas.

The nomadic societies in these countries, like the Afar in Eritrea and Djibouti, and the Somali nomadic societies along the coast of the Gulf of Aden, used camels and donkeys to exchange goods in these arid lands. The caravan method played a critical role in the exchange of goods from landlocked countries, such as ivory, gold, hides, frankincense, and myrrh, to the ports.

On the other hand, goods like textiles, glass beads, metal goods, and ceramics from Arabia, the Mediterranean region, and South Asia passed from these ports to the landlocked countries. The trade was made possible by the caravan routes between these ports and the landlocked countries (Munro-Hay, 1991; Phillipson, 2012).

Through these activities, nomadic herders became vital intermediaries connecting maritime trade networks with the economic systems of the Horn of Africa's interior.

Archaeological and ethnohistorical records indicate that the herders helped in the transportation of goods such as frankincense, myrrh, ivory, salt, livestock, and cereals from the inland regions of production using their herds of animals, labour, and guidance (Woldekiros, 2014).

The trade activities in the region received an impetus from the pastoral communities, who took advantage of guiding the caravans, facilitating access to the resources in the difficult environments.

The herders' awareness of the seasonal variations, availability of water, and pasture was essential for the long-distance trade, especially in the semi-arid and desert environments where the availability of resources was critical for the survival of the traders (Seland, 2014).

Apart from the above contributions, herders maintained relations with diverse communities, and this helped them to mediate trade agreements, settle conflicts, and guarantee a safe route for the movement of merchants and items of trade (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2022).

Herders' advantage in controlling strategic trade networks influenced regional exchange systems. Hence, herders gained economic and social benefits from long-distance trade.

The involvement of the nomadic herders in the Horn of Africa as an intermediary is further supported by material evidence. Excavations carried out in Somaliland and Northern Somalia have shown that they took an active part in the exchange and consumption of imported Roman, South Arabian, and Indian Ocean products (Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022).

Therefore, the herders were not just passive actors but took an active part in the trade and influenced the movement and structure of trade.

7 Islamic expansion and trade integration (7th-15th centuries)

The spread of Islam that started in the seventh century also marked a period of change in the business system in the Horn of Africa, which further added to the integration of the region into the business system in the Red Sea/Indian Ocean region.

The Islamic traders residing in the Horn of Africa, most of whom came from Arabia but also from the rest of the Islamic world,

played a key role in the development of business centres in the region, including Zeila, Berbera, and Massawa. The trade hubs played a major role in connecting the hinterlands of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia into the commercial networks in the Red Sea/Indian Ocean region. The commodities exported from the Horn of Africa included cattle, ivory, gold, incense, hides, and slaves, while imported items comprised textiles, glassware, ceramics, and metals from Arabia, Persia, and South Asia (Munro-Hay, 1991; Power, 2012).

From the 7th century CE onward, significant changes occurred in trade and lifestyles in the Horn of Africa, mainly due to Islamic influence and the region's integration into the Islamic trade network.

Port towns such as Zeila, Berbera, Mogadishu, and Sofala became key trade hubs. They connected the Horn of Africa with the Arabian Peninsula, Persia, India, and eventually the Swahili Coast (Pouwels, 2002). These port towns were vital not only for trade, but also for Islamic education and tradition in the region. The growth of Islamic practices helped boost trade because of shared laws and spiritual principles.

Archaeological evidence shows an increase in goods imported from Yemen, Persia, and other Islamic countries. All these trade centres were linked to the Indian Ocean trade network, which strengthened trade relations and connected people (González-Ruibal, 2023; González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2021).

The emergence and development of the Islamic religion along the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea coastlines marked the beginning of new forms of trade and maritime connections.

The Muslim traders not only traded goods such as textiles, glassware, and spices, but they also traded banking methods and financial instruments that facilitated the process of financial transactions over long distances (Horton and Middleton, 2000).

This marked the beginning of the enhancement of the effectiveness and reliability of the market networks, which eventually led to the emergence and development of both coastal and inland trading centres.

The expansion of the Islamic religion in the Red Sea region and the Horn of Africa marked the beginning of the promotion of trade through the use of the common religion as a way of promoting trust among the traders.

The expansion of the Islamic religion in the area encouraged the development of long-distance trade through the application of institutions, pilgrimage, and scholars. This was the onset of the promotion of cultural interactions (Gonzalez-Ruibal, 2003).

Archaeological findings also suggest that the area received imports from Yemen, Persia, and other Islamic territories.

Archaeological evidence from ports in Somalia, such as Mogadishu, and ports in Northern Somaliland is indication of continuous growth in maritime trade under the influence of Islam. Excavation of these sites has yielded evidence of ceramics from China, India, and Persia, as well as glassware and coins, which show regional and international exchange of goods and currency (Bradbury, 2007). These archaeological sites confirm that the Horn of Africa was fully incorporated into Indian Ocean commerce. The region actively took part in the exchange of valuable and ordinary goods.

The spread of Islam also enhanced inland trade networks. Caravan routes connecting highlands in the hinterland and pastoral areas to coastal ports turned into a gradually organized system within the framework of Islamic trade regulations (sharia-based practices) and social networks of Muslim merchants (Pouwels, 2002).

Nomadic herders maintained their role as intermediaries and transported goods like ivory, gold, and incense from interior regions to markets on the coast. These inland-coastal networks were further strengthened by urban nodes from which both locally produced and imported commodities were distributed (Horton and Middleton, 2000).

Islam's close link with trade has both political and cultural impacts. The Sultanate of Mogadishu and the Adal Sultanate on the coast used revenues from trade to reinforce political power and maintain political and strategic ties with surrounding regions and distant trading partners (Bradbury, 2007).

During the 14th and 15th centuries, the Horn was a crucial centre in the Indian Ocean trade network. Commodities from China, India, and the Middle East were exchanged through ports on the coast to the hinterland. On the other hand, locally produced goods from the hinterland, including gold, ivory, and livestock, were exported to distant markets. Consequently, the economy of the Horn saw commercial integration and transformation under

Islam. It also facilitated inter-regional connection between the Horn and Afro-Eurasian trade routes, and familiarized societies of the region with an inter-regional trade network, cultural, and religious interaction (Pouwels, 2002; Horton and Middleton, 2000; Bradbury, 2007).

In addition, the spread of Islam helped in the commercial integration of people as a result of the shared religion, culture, and law, which were useful in promoting long-distance trade and cooperation among merchants.

Islamic sultanates and their trading communities along the coast, for example, the Sultanate of Ifat and the Adal Sultanate were instrumental in promoting trade routes between the coast and Ethiopia (Fattovich, 2010; Phillipson, 2012).

Therefore, between the 7th and 15th centuries, the Horn of Africa became integrated into the commercial systems of the Red Sea and Islamic world.

Available literature indicates that the spread of Islam in the region from the 7th century to the 15th century was crucial in shaping the economic and social structure in the Horn of Africa region. This region was connected by a series of ports along the coast and by caravans, enabling trade in the Indian Ocean region under the principles and laws of Islam. This region was characterized by trade, which enabled interactions across culture, religion, and politics, making it a focal point in Afro-Eurasia.

8 Medieval trade in the Indian Ocean (11th-16th centuries)

The Horn of Africa remained active in the Indian Ocean trade network from the 11th to the 16th century.

Ports connecting the region to South Arabia, India, the Maldives, and Madagascar include Berbera, Bulhar, and Mogadishu (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2022). The findings from archaeological surveys conducted in this area, near Berbera and other ports along the Red Sea, show that this period was marked by long-distance trade, especially through ceramics and goods shipped to these ports (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2021).

Berbera, as a trading hub in the Indian Ocean, stayed active throughout the medieval era. Archaeological evidence reveals numerous foreign goods, with a large portion of imports consisting of Asian ceramics. These findings suggest that goods brought

into Berbera were redistributed inland, supplying pastoral and highland communities with essentials (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2021).

Medieval states, such as the Adal Sultanate (c. 1403-1577), further reshaped trade routes. Adal's government structure and alliances expanded the commercial roles of ports like Berbera and Mogadishu, boosting trade activities and connecting them to wider Indian Ocean networks.

However, starting in the late 16th century, external forces—mainly Portuguese naval interventions and regional conflicts—disrupted these trade routes and weakened long-distance commerce (González Ruibal *et al.*, 2021).

Overall, between the 11th and 16th centuries, the ports of Berbera, Bulhar, and Mogadishu served as key centres within the Indian Ocean trade network, facilitating the exchange of goods between the interior Horn of Africa, Asia, Arabia, and beyond. This trade was deeply embedded in local customs and administrative systems, notably under the influence of the Adal Sultanate. These developments highlight the significant role the Horn of Africa played in medieval maritime trade (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2021).

To conclude, the Horn of Africa has been significant in the trade network of the Indian Ocean between the 11th and 16th centuries.

Trade centres like Berbera, Bulhar, and Mogadishu linked the region with Arabia, India, and other places. The archaeological records, particularly the ceramics, indicate the trade and the exchange of goods with the interior region.

The Adal Sultanate further developed the trade network by connecting the trade centres with the interior region. But the trade network declined in the late 16th century because of the wars and the interference of the Portuguese Empire.

9 Modern history of trade routes in the Horn of Africa

From the 16th to the early 20th century, trade in the Horn of Africa responded to changing regional politics, European expansion, and integration into a global economy.

The ports along the coast, such as Massawa and Assab in Eritrea, Djibouti, and Berbera in Somalia, were major centres for importing textiles, firearms, sugar, coffee, and other manufactured

commodities, as well as for exporting regional commodities such as coffee, hides, salt, gum arabic, and livestock (Fattovich, 2010; Power, 2012).

Inland caravan routes continued to link production centres to the ports, and while nomadic pastoral networks were indispensable in earlier eras, they are here referenced only briefly, since their intermediary role has already been discussed (see «Nomadic herders as intermediaries in trade»).

The emphasis in the modern period lies on the emergence of port politics, colonial interventions, and infrastructure developments that reshaped trade dynamics. Portuguese naval incursions in the 16th century challenged traditional Indian Ocean networks operating through Berbera, Zeila, and Mogadishu (Newitt, 1995).



Figure 3. Map showing Red Sea ports (© Google, n.d).

In the 17th-19th centuries, British and Italian colonial interests continued to influence the region's trade. The British Somaliland wanted to control the flow of commerce and taxation via Berbera, and the Italian Somaliland built ports and roads connecting the coastline with the hinterland (Samatar, 1989). The Eritrean ports of Massawa and Assab continued to cater to Ethiopian and other

regional trade, and the Somali ports of Bosaso were international ports in their own right (Ahmed, 2011; Mohamoud, 2014).

Despite all these geopolitical problems, the historical patterns in trade have been sustained. The coastal ports continue to be centres for international trade, while pastoral and rural networks continue to facilitate trade from production centres to marine outlets.

The development of new infrastructure, such as new roads, railways, and port expansion, has integrated the Horn of Africa into world trade, following centuries of historical interconnectedness (Ahmed, 2011; Mohamoud, 2014).

To recapitulate, the contemporary trade routes in the Horn of Africa attest to the continuity of the historical trade routes that have been influenced by geography, the role of the nomads as intermediaries, and the strategic location of the ports.

European colonialism and contemporary geopolitics have changed but not altered the essential character of the historical trade routes in the region. The ports of Massawa, Assab, Berbera, and Djibouti, and the land routes, have continued to keep the region engaged in intercontinental trade for over two millennia.

10 Political, military, and geopolitical implications for trade in the Horn of Africa

Trade in the Horn of Africa has historically been shaped by political power, military influence, and strategic control over key corridors. From ancient caravan networks connecting highland and lowland regions to modern port-based logistics, access to trade routes has always reflected the interests of multiple regional actors (Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022).

In the case of Eritrea, after it was granted independence in 1993, Ethiopia was left landlocked, and this meant that access to ports was a necessity.

In the past, emperors of Ethiopia, such as Emperor Menelik II, have attempted to access the ports of the Red Sea so that they can link the highland region with international routes for the export of products such as coffee, ivory, and hides, and the importation of products such as textiles, metals, and ceramics (Bahru, 2001; Munro-Hay, 1991; Phillipson, 2012). The loss of the ports of Assab and Massawa to Italian colonial powers only

serves to underscore the point that Ethiopia has never been able to access the sea.

In the modern world, Ethiopia has mainly utilized the Port of Djibouti, and this has given Djibouti significant influence over Ethiopia's trade activities.

In a bid to improve access to alternative trade routes, Ethiopia signed a Memorandum of Understanding to lease land in the area of the Port of Berbera in Somaliland, and this has improved trade logistics as well as political relations. However, Somalia, which claims that Somaliland is part of its sovereign state, has been opposed to this Memorandum of Understanding and recalled its envoy due to violations of sovereignty (Intergovernmental Authority on Development, 2022; Somaliland Reporter, 2024).

For Eritrea, control over Massawa and Assab is a historic strategic advantage. These ports give Eritrea control over its trade, fishing, and shipping activities, and enable it to influence regional and international negotiations (Fattovich, 2010). Eritrea's strategic position illustrates that access to the Red Sea is not only an economic gain but also gives Eritrea political leverage in its relations with Ethiopia, Djibouti, and other Red Sea nations.

Somalia's interest in the ports of Berbera and Bosaso shows the balance between sovereignty and economic interests. The ports allow Somalia and Somaliland access to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, thus ensuring the economic stability of this region, as well as encouraging foreign investment and partnership (Power, 2012). The position of Somalia regarding Ethiopian agreements in Somaliland shows how there is a balance in interests.

The Horn of Africa is still in a state of geopolitical instability. The Ethiopia-Eritrea relations and occasional instability in Somalia pose risks to overland and marine trade routes (GIS Reports Online, 2025; Council on Foreign Relations, 2026; International Crisis Group, 2025; Lyons, 2020). The involvement of Gulf state proxies, as well as changing allegiances in the region, has an impact on the security and reliability of trade routes (The Century Foundation, 2026; Dawan Africa, 2026; Chatham House, 2025; Verhoeven, 2018; Gebru et al., 2023).

This competition for access to ports holds geopolitical and military importance. The expansion of access to Ethiopian ports, along with Eritrea's independence and Somalia's independence, has created a complex, interconnected situation. In summary, regional

trade is not purely economic. Gaining access to ports, controlling routes, and forming alliances carry significant geopolitical weight. Analysing the issues from the perspectives of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Somaliland reveals that regional trade patterns have been shaped by centuries of intertwined historical, military, and geopolitical events. The dispute over routes and port access stems from these longstanding geopolitical patterns.

11 Cultural and economic impacts of trade in the Horn of Africa

Traditionally, trade in the Horn of Africa has affected the economic structures as well as the composition of the culture in the region. From the ancient period to the present day, trade in the Horn of Africa has enabled the formation of urban centres, social stratification, and culture that have linked the region to the rest of Afro-Eurasia (Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022).

From an economic point of view, trade activity contributed to the economic diversification of local and regional markets through the connection of coastal ports with inland economic centres. For example, in Antiquity, the ports of Xiis (Heis) and Mundus were key in facilitating trade exchanges in commodities such as Africa's ivory, tortoiseshell, and frankincense in return for Roman, Parthian, and South Arabian commodities (Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022; Seland, 2014).

While trade helped the creation of wealth among regional elites, it encouraged the involvement of nomadic pastoralists as intermediaries in the trade redistribution of imported goods into inland regions (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2022).

In the medieval period, ports like Berbera, Bulhar, and Mogadishu emerged as centres of economic specialization, with urban residents like artisans, merchants, and traders participating in complex supply chains with the Horn of Africa, India, and the Maldives (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2021).

Trade had an impact on the type of labour and production styles. For instance, towns on the coast had unique economies, such as weaving, shipbuilding, and ceramics. On the other hand, the interior had cattle, incense, and agricultural surpluses to cater to the needs of the local and international markets (Horton and Middleton, 2000). This led to economic interdependence between the urban, interior, and coastal societies. This contributed to the social and economic resilience.

From a cultural perspective, trade promoted the exchange of religion and ideas, particularly after the advent of the Islamic religion in the 7th century. The coastal towns became major Islamic centres of learning. Mosques, madrasahs, and waqf not only promoted prayer and learning, but also facilitated trade through credit systems that were based on Sharia law (Pouwels, 2002; Bradbury, 2007). In the process, craftsmen, scholars, and travellers introduced new designs, languages, and art forms that are evident in the cities of Mogadishu, Zeila, and Harar (Horton and Middleton, 2000).

Socially, trade impacted ritual and cultural practices, with the use of imported luxury items during ceremonies and marriages, which signified local identity as well as participation in international networks (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2022). In addition, the transmission of coins, textiles, and pottery ensured that people within the Horn region and beyond shared a common culture.

In the modern period, trade has continued to carry economic and cultural implications. The availability of ports like Djibouti, Berbera, and Bosaso provides international trade opportunities, urbanization, and the continued participation of herders in regional markets, while modern goods and culture move at rapid rates throughout the region to preserve historical interconnectivity patterns (Ahmed, 2011; Mohamoud, 2014).

In summary, trade in the Horn of Africa has always impacted economic development as well as cultural activities. Trade has linked the inland and coastal dwellers, facilitated the creation of wealth, promoted social complexity, and integrated the region into the larger Afro-Eurasian world (Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022; González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2021; Horton and Middleton, 2000).

Table 1. Summary of imports and exports through the major ports of the Horn of Africa

Country	Port	Location / Notes	Main Exports	Main Imports	Historical / Modern Use	References
Eritrea	Massawa	Red Sea coast	Coffee, livestock, hides, ivory; enslaved persons (historical Red Sea trade)	Textiles, machinery, metal goods	Key Aksumite and Islamic trade port; still active today	Munro-Hay (1991); Phillipson (2012); Fattovich (2010); Pankhurst (1961)
	Assab	Southern Red Sea coast	Coffee, salt, livestock	Manufactured goods, textiles	Ethiopia's main outlet in the late 19th-20th century; later controlled during Italian colonization	Bahru (2001); Munro-Hay (1991); Pankhurst (1961)
Djibouti	Port of Djibouti	Gulf of Tadjoura	Livestock, salt, coffee	Petroleum, foodstuffs, manufactured goods	Modern major transit hub for Ethiopia's imports and exports	Bahru (2001); Power (2012)
Somalia	Berbera	Gulf of Aden	Livestock, hides, gum arabic; enslaved persons (regional trade in some periods)	Textiles, sugar, ceramics	Historical trade with Arabia, India, and Europe; modern development as a commercial port	Power (2012); Fattovich (2010); Pankhurst (1961)

History of trade routes in the Horn of Africa

	Zeila	Gulf of Aden	Livestock, frankincense, myrrh; enslaved persons (medieval trade networks)	Textiles, ceramics	An important medieval Islamic trade hub linking Ethiopia and Arabia, it declined after Berbera grew	Munro-Hay (1991); Fattovich (2010); Pankhurst (1961)
Ethiopia	–	Landlocked since 1993; earlier access through Red Sea ports	Coffee, hides, ivory	Textiles, machinery	Depended on caravan routes linking the interior with Red Sea and Gulf of Aden ports	Bahru (2001); Pankhurst (1961); Power (2012)
Kenya	Port of Mombasa	Indian Ocean coast	Ivory, hides, agricultural products; enslaved persons (Indian Ocean trade)	Textiles, metalware, luxury goods	Major Swahili and modern port connecting East Africa with Arabia, India, and Europe	Fattovich (2010); Power (2012); Chittick (1974)
	Lamu	Indian Ocean coast	Spices, ivory, agricultural produce; enslaved persons (regional trade)	Textiles, beads, ceramics	Important Swahili trading town connecting the interior to maritime networks	Fattovich (2010); Power (2012); Chittick (1974)

Sudan	Suakin	Red Sea coast	Gold, ivory, gum arabic; enslaved persons (Red Sea slave trade transit)	Textiles, spices, and manufactured goods	Medieval and early modern Islamic port linking the Nile corridor trade to the Red Sea routes	Fattovich (2010); Power (2012); Pankhurst (1961)
	Port Sudan	Red Sea coast	Gum arabic, livestock, minerals	Machinery, petroleum, foodstuffs	The modern principal port of Sudan, handling most international trade	Power (2012); Fattovich (2010)

12 Concluding remarks

In tracing the historical evolution of trade routes in the Horn of Africa, it is clear that this region of Africa has always been in a strategic position in terms of its relationship with the larger Afro-Eurasian world system.

From the beginning of the Common Era until the modern era, the Horn of Africa was a dynamic bridge between Africa and Arabia.

From archaeological evidence, it is clear that both the maritime trade routes and the inland caravan routes worked in tandem in order to ensure the free flow of goods, people, and ideas in different ecological and political zones. While the coastal trade centres of Adulis, Zeila, Berbera, and Mogadishu linked the hinterlands of Ethiopia with the international maritime system, the inland caravan routes ensured the free flow of goods between the production zones and the international market.

Another equally important factor was the involvement of nomadic pastoral societies in supporting these networks. The pastoral societies were aware of the routes that the caravans would follow during different seasons and the water and pasture resources that were available. The involvement of these societies as intermediaries was quite instrumental in forming the regional trading networks. The involvement of these societies in the regional trading networks in the Horn of Africa shows the relationship between the environment and the economy.

Another important factor that played a major role in the influence of trade in the region are the religious and political changes. The emergence of Islam from the 7th century onward helped to enhance trade in the region because it laid down cultural norms that contributed to connect the region through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. The establishment of towns on the coast helped to create a platform for the advancement of learning, hence further consolidating the integration of the region. The developments that followed in the region, such as the European expansion and colonialism, helped to change the nature of the region while still emphasizing the ports on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

It is under the aforementioned context that the need for Ethiopia to have access to the sea has been a key issue in the region's geopolitics. In this case, various countries that made up Ethiopia sought to have access to ports like Massawa and Assab to link the

economy of the highlands to the international economy. However, following the emergence of colonialism in the region towards the end of the 19th century, coupled with Eritrea's independence in 1993, Ethiopia was left as a landlocked country. Ethiopia had to rely on the support of the Djibouti port for international trade, although it has sought to have access to the region via the Berbera port. In essence, this means that the control of sea routes has been a key issue in the region's geopolitics.

Despite the many changes that have taken place over time, the underlying nature of trade within the region has been remarkably consistent. Maritime ports, inland caravan routes, and intermediary groups have remained key components of the region's economic landscape. Contemporary infrastructure and international trade networks have clearly reshaped the historical trade networks, but they are nevertheless reminiscent of the interregional interdependence that was first established many centuries ago.

Finally, the history of the trade routes of the Horn of Africa is meant to illustrate the significance of the region as a crossroads for trade, culture, and politics. The fact that the region is a link for the African continent with the rest of the world for the purposes of trade, both by sea and by land, only serves to underscore the fact that the Horn of Africa has been a significant hub for trade for the last two thousand years or so. The historical background of the region is not only relevant for the history of the region, but is also relevant for the current debate on the economy of the region.

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Chapter Seven

Culture, language and propaganda in the Horn of Africa: political narratives across Ethiopia, Djibouti, Eritrea and Somalia

Nasra Dahir Mohamed

Abstract

This chapter examines how culture, language, propaganda, and political narratives cross borders in the Horn of Africa, focusing on Ethiopia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somalia. This chapter argues that even though political borders divide these nation-states, the connections between communities are deeper than the invisible borderlines imagined among them. Languages cross those borders, cultures travel through them, and political narratives are negotiated across the different corners of the region. The Horn of Africa is home to multiple ethnic groups, and many of these same communities live across different countries. For example, the Afar inhabit Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, while Somalis live in Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, and Kenya. These shared linguistic and cultural connections demonstrate that identity and belonging in the region are not limited to the boundaries of the modern nation-state. The chapter, therefore, explores how language, culture, and propaganda interact with political narratives across borders and how these countries' language and cultural policies differ, and each of them politicizes language and culture. It also reflects on the recent events taking place in the Horn of Africa and their strategic consequences and benefits for the region. The

main finding of this chapter is that language and culture have a strong political presence, and in the twenty-first century, digital media is functioning as transaction identity in the Horn of Africa, which is operating beyond the political boundaries.

Keywords

Cross-border identity, Political narratives, Language.

1 Introduction

The Horn of Africa has historically been an interconnected region shaped by trade, shared cultural practices, linguistic interaction, and networks that linked communities across the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Geographically, the region occupies a strategic location with direct access to the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Gulf, and the Red Sea, placing it at the center of maritime routes that connect Africa with the Middle East and Asia. For centuries, coastal cities such as Zeila, Assab, Massawa, Tadjoura, Mogadishu, Berbera, Lughaya, and Maydh participated in wider commercial and cultural networks that linked the Horn with the Muslim empires of the Ottoman, Abbasid, and Umayyad caliphates, as well as merchants from Arabia, India, and China. Through these interactions, the Horn of Africa became part of a broader Indian Ocean world in which goods, people, and business circulated across maritime routes, contributing to the cultural richness and historical depth of the region (Lewis, 2002; Pankhurst, 1997). Despite these long-standing connections, however, the Horn of Africa rarely existed as a unified political unit. Differences in religion, language, culture, and political organization have historically produced multiple centres of power rather than a single political system.

The region has also historically had enmity among them, as Shihāb Ad-Dīn Ahmad's (2003: 40-45) book discusses the conflict between the Adal empire—'Somali tribes,' or in other words, Muslim lowlanders—and the Christian Ethiopian Empire, or highlanders. The current political structure of the modern Horn of Africa largely emerged from the colonial partition of the region in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Eritrea was formed through Italian colonial rule, and Djibouti developed from the French colonial territory of French Somaliland, British Somaliland, and Italian Somalia, which later formed separate colonial administrations, and Somalia itself emerged through the union of former British and Italian territories in 1960. Although Ethiopia was not formally colonized, its territorial expansion during the late 19th century incorporated Somali-inhabited territories such as the Hawd and the Reserved Area, which had previously been administered through colonial arrangements with the British (Lewis, 2002; Clapham, 2017). As a result, the political boundaries that define the contemporary states of the Horn of Africa largely reflect colonial administrative divisions rather than the

historical communities that have lived alongside each other and maintained both peaceful and conflictual relationships, cultural and political, forming a complex relationship.

Regardless of the colonial creation of nation-state borders, identities in the Horn of Africa regularly extend beyond national boundaries. Ethnic and linguistic communities often inhabit territories that span multiple states, creating social and cultural networks that cross political borders. For example, these demographic and cultural realities demonstrate that belonging in the Horn of Africa cannot be fully contained within the boundaries of modern states. The Afar population lives across Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, while Somali communities inhabit territories in Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, and Kenya. These cross-border communities share linguistic traditions, social institutions, and historical experiences that predate the formation of modern nation-states. The region is characterized by significant cultural diversity. Ethiopia alone contains more than eighty ethnic groups, each with its own language and cultural traditions, whereas Eritrea officially recognizes nine ethnic groups, the largest of which is the Tigrinya community, which also forms the fourth largest ethnic group in neighbouring Ethiopia.

The point is that as many African scholars emphasize the 'invention' of Africa or the 'invention' of regions such as the Maghrib through colonial knowledge production, these interpretations of the historical formation of the Horn of Africa (Mudimbe, 1988; Hannoum, 2001) also resonate the reality in the Horn even though the Horn did not emerge as a single political entity; rather, it existed as a region connected through commercial routes, religious exchange, and cultural interaction within the wider Indian Ocean trading system. The nation-state that came from this region followed in the footsteps of colonial invention. What colonial powers primarily introduced to the region was the political fragmentation of existing communities, dividing families and ethnic groups across newly established nation-state boundaries.

The formation of modern nation-states, therefore, did not occur because of shared languages, cultural traditions, or historical networks. Instead, it resulted from the divisions created by colonial administrations, which later became the political foundations of the present states. These political authorities have frequently relied on narratives, propaganda, and national identity projects to construct and consolidate political legitimacy within these relatively recent state formations. In the coming sections, this becomes more visible as political speeches become propaganda

for governments. As Ellul (1973) argued, the most important objective of propaganda is the creation of national self-awareness, which coming speeches attempt to achieve, because political speeches shape collective attitudes and mobilize public support. Understanding the Horn of Africa, therefore, requires examining both the historical interconnectedness of its societies and the political processes that have organized these diverse communities into modern nation-states.

2 Cross-border ethnic communities and shared cultural landscapes

'We – the Tigrinya-speakers – are all only separated by political leaders' (Feyissa and Hoehne 2010: 62). This statement comes from a Tigrinya person in Eritrea. Although the book *Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa* explains the different uses of the word *Tigrinya*, some see it as a language, while others see it as an ethnic group. In the Horn of Africa, however, cross-border ethnic or clan communities and the fluidity of identity have existed since the formation of modern nation-states. Herders cross borders to find grazing land for their livestock, and some even share the same clan leader or traditional leader, whose communities live in two or three countries. In that case, customary law does not follow state borders. This is particularly common among the Somali people across the Horn, from Djibouti, the Somali Ethiopian Region, Northern Frontier District (NFD) of Kenya, Somaliland, and Somalia.

In this sense, there are several similarities between the Ethio-Eritrean ethnic formation, which is shaped by politics, and the Somalia-Somaliland conflict, even though the Somali's share culture and language. For example, Eritreans cannot call themselves *Tigray*, because *Tigray* refers to a region in Ethiopia, but *Tigrinya* is the language that they both speak (Feyissa and Hoehne, 2010: 66). Meanwhile, people in Somaliland still often call themselves 'Somali.' Even though, because of the recent political conflict that has arisen, there are increasing voices claiming that 'we are Somalilanders,' presenting this identity as something different from Somali, since 'Somali' is often associated with Somalia.

Similarly, this discourse of separation and unity also appears within Tigrinya traditions and identity. Indeed, 'We have never been one' versus 'We are the same' (Feyissa and Hoehne, 2010: 66) reflects the same tension found in the Somalia-Somaliland

debate. Meanwhile, the other Somali communities in Djibouti, Ethiopia, and NFD Kenya appear to maintain a more fixed Somali identity, largely because they coexist with other ethnic communities from whom they distinguish themselves.

The European colonial border did not consider the long *durée* of the decisions that they took, which drew nation-states without studying pastoral mobility, clan territories, languages, and cultures shared by these communities. It is not new to the world to invent systems that are beyond ethnicity, religion, language, and culture; it is how the European nation-states were formed (Anderson, 2006). However, duplicating that ideology in the Horn of Africa has resulted in fragmented communities, with the Somali ethnic community being in five countries: British Somaliland, Italian Somaliland, French Somaliland (Djibouti), Ethiopia, and Kenya. Afar communities are scattered across Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti, just as scattered as the Tigrinya people.

What makes this different is that these communities are very close to each other. For example, one Somali family can be found in all these countries, and the attachment to their identity is very strong because of the clan structure, with the clan being the insurance of this community. According to I. M. Lewis (1994: 11-12), Saho, Somali, and Afar are very close in terms of culture, as they are mainly nomadic. They are southern Cushitic people, and there are some cultural similarities: they share the religion of Islam, mainly Sufi, apart from the Saho, who have some Christian Orthodox. Their love of the camel is also shared, which the northern Somali and the Somali in Ethiopia also have. In terms of language, they all belong to the Cushitic family.

In this section, three theoretical conceptions become more visible regarding the idea of borders in the Horn of Africa. Borders in this region appear to be invisible, particularly for the nomadic communities of the Horn of Africa. For these communities, colonial borders often do not exist in their everyday practices. They move to places where they can find water and pasture, which are the resources most essential to their survival.

This idea connects to what Feyissa and Hoehne (2010: 1-13) describe as borderland theory. According to this perspective, cross-border integration takes place every day, because borders are not isolated or impenetrable walls. Trade crosses these borders regularly, families live across them, and pastoral movements

frequently pass through them. In practice, there are therefore two different ways of understanding borders: how states perceive and enforce them, and how ordinary people interact with and live across them in their daily lives.

This dynamic is also connected to the question of belonging. For example, the Afar communities living in Eritrea's Dankalia region experience border conflicts differently. If a conflict occurs between Djibouti and Eritrea, for them, it becomes more than a conflict between states, because some individuals belong to families and communities that span both nation-states. A similar situation exists among the Afar in Ethiopia. The same can be observed among Somalis in Somalia and neighbouring countries, although the Somali case contains another layer of belonging through clan affiliation, which is often more intimate and socially meaningful than broader ethnic identity.

These transnational ethnic groups in the Horn of Africa have a significant impact on the relationship between state and society. In this context, the idea of the nation-state as an imagined community becomes more complex. Anderson (2006) argues that imagined communities are politically powerful but philosophically fragile. Evidence of this tension can be observed in the Horn of Africa. Another good example is the project of Somali nationalism, which faced major challenges despite the strong cultural unity of Somali communities. In some ways, the Somali case even complicates Anderson's argument, because Somalis are not strangers to one another; many can trace and narrate their genealogies through shared clan histories. However, translating these social connections into stable political unity has proven difficult.

For this analysis, part of the explanation lies in the structural differences between agricultural societies and nomadic societies. Nomadic communities are organized around mobility and flexible social structures that allow them to move freely across territories. The first experience many Somalis had with centralized governance was under authoritarian rule, which often conflicted with these traditions of autonomy and mobility. As a result, many communities may feel more comfortable operating within smaller clan networks governed by customary law rather than within a centralized state structure whose authority they neither trust nor fully understand. Borders, therefore, created political separation but did not eliminate cultural continuity across the region.

3 Language as a cultural infrastructure of identity in the Horn of Africa

Language has historically functioned as a central cultural infrastructure shaping identity and political belonging in the Horn of Africa. In Ethiopia, the state was historically organized around the dominance of the Amharic language and Orthodox Christianity, which were often presented as markers of political authority and national identity. This framework contributed to tensions between the Ethiopian highlands and the lowland regions, such as the Somali-inhabited territories, where linguistic, cultural, and religious differences became politically significant. The political reforms introduced under Meles Zenawi after 1991 transformed this model by weakening the dominance of a single language and religion in state ideology and introducing a more secular and decentralized political order.

Ethiopia's federal system is now structured around ethno-linguistic federalism, where regional states are largely defined by linguistic and ethnic identity (Abbink, 2011). This model reflects a shift from the earlier 'one language, one religion' framework toward a system that recognizes multiple linguistic communities within the state. Regional autonomy is therefore closely tied to language-based identity. A recent example is the Sidama referendum of 2019 (Yilma, 2020), in which the Sidama people voted to secede from the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region and form their own regional state, demonstrating how linguistic and cultural identity can shape administrative and political boundaries.

Within this linguistic and political landscape, one language that has become highly politicized in the Horn of Africa is Tigrinya, spoken primarily in Northern Ethiopia (Tigray) and Eritrea. The language occupies a complex position in the politics of identity and nationalism because it is spoken in two states whose political trajectories have separated significantly since Eritrea's independence in 1993. In Eritrea, Tigrinya is one of the dominant languages of administration, media, and national culture. At the same time, in Ethiopia, it is strongly associated with the regional identity of the Tigray people, as Ethiopia is more multicultural and multiethnic than Eritrea. This shared linguistic heritage has sometimes raised political questions about cultural ownership and national belonging, particularly during periods of conflict between the two states. This situation demonstrates that sharing culture,

language, and religion does not necessarily eliminate political conflict (Iyob 1995; Tronvoll 1998). The politicization of Tigrinya, therefore, shows how language in the Horn of Africa functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a marker of political identity, historical memory, and shaping competing narratives of nationhood and belonging across borders.

These competing narratives are not only historical, but they also have a continuous political meaning attached to the languages. For example, Tigrinya has undergone a shift since the 2018 peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, signed by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki. The agreement officially ended two decades of hostility following the Eritrean-Ethiopian War and initially appeared to open opportunities for reconciliation between the two societies. During this early period of diplomatic engagement, the reopening of borders and renewed cooperation seemed to soften earlier nationalist narratives that had emphasized separation between Eritrean and Ethiopian identities. For a moment, shared cultural and linguistic ties among Tigrinya-speaking communities appeared to re-emerge as potential bridges between the two states. However, this shift proved temporary. The outbreak of the Tigray War dramatically changed these dynamics, transforming the political meaning of Tigrinya once again. Rather than functioning as a cross-border cultural connector, the language became embedded in the conflict between the Ethiopian Federal Government and the Tigray regional leadership. As a result, the language that once symbolized shared cultural heritage became entangled in competing political narratives of loyalty, sovereignty, and state politics.

In contrast to Tigrinya, another powerful language in the Horn of Africa is Somali. Across the region, Somalis share culture, language, religion, and history. Yet today, Somali belonging is increasingly claimed through nation-states. This close attachment of Somali identity to political projects was not always so visible. In October 1972, a crucial event in Somali history took place when the Somali language was given an official, unifying written script. The critical question is whether the standardization of the Somali language contributed to the formation of a shared political imagination, as Anderson (2006) describes the emergence of 'imagined communities,' in which modern nations often develop around a standardized national language. The Somali

language, therefore, reflects the socio-cultural connections of Somali society and its culture of belonging. This aligns with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986: 30) argument that language has a dual character: it functions both as a means of communication and as a carrier of culture, transmitting values, memory, and collective identity across generations.

When a language is shared by people who cross borders and live in different countries, it begins to extend beyond the nation-state, because its symbolic ownership is not exclusive to a single country. In the Somali case, political transformations after the collapse of the Somali state in 1990 and the declaration of Somaliland's independence shifted the political meaning of Somali nationalism (Samatar, 1992). These developments encouraged Somali communities to remain largely within colonial borders rather than pursue the earlier political vision of rebuilding a unified Somali state. This dynamic adds another dimension to Anderson's argument that nationalism is not only a political project but also a cultural process through which imagined communities are formed. In the Somali case, although the political project of nationalism fragmented, another unifying structure remained, the Somali language.

In contemporary cultural practice, poetry continues to function as an important political and social tool (Samatar, 1982). To analyse this, and give an example across the Horn of Africa, the dataset that is used is constructed from comments from YouTube, and there have been several studies in the comment section in other fields, like media and communication, which studied how the comment section shapes audience interpretation of media (Chen and Xia, 2024) also studied how the comments section functions as a social influence space (Houston *et al.*, 2011). Similarly, scholars such as Weber *et al.* (2017) study comment sections and journalism. This book chapter adopts the approaches used by these researchers to collect data from YouTube comment sections. It applies them to the analysis of Somali literature, focusing on the most visible comments and those with the most replies. This practice is visible in groups such as Xidigaha Geeska (Stars of the Horn), which was established in 2013. The group has positioned itself as a cultural diplomat in the Horn of Africa. Through political poems and songs composed by young poets, they engage with questions of identity, belonging, and collective memory. One example is a song composed by the young poet Abdirasaaq Haamud Jaylaani:

'Djibouti qiimahaaga weeye
Jigjiga quruxdaada weeye
Gaarisa qaydkaaga weeye
Muqdisho qoridaadii weeye
Hargeysa qaamuuskaaga weeye
[Djibouti reflects your courage.
Jigjiga embodies your beauty.
Garissa keeps you united.
Mogadishu is where your script was formalised.
Hargeisa is your dictionary].'

On one level, this song attempts to revive the collective spirit of the Somali language by framing it as shared cultural ownership among all Somali speakers. With the transformation of communication in the social media era, the song was first published on YouTube. By February 2026, the song had 1.1 million views and 1,195 comments on one YouTube channel¹. The poet also references all five Somali regions and their contributions to the development of the Somali language. This geographic mapping of the Somali language across regions produces a strong sense of collective belonging. From the public reaction, it was not possible to analyse all 1,195 comments, as many consisted only of emojis or short reactions unrelated to the song's meaning. A large proportion of comments, however, were strongly positive.

For this analysis, the sample was selected using the formula:

$$\begin{aligned}n &= N / (1 + N e^2) \\n &= 1\,195 / (1 + 1\,195 \times 0,0025) \\n &= 1195 / 3,9875 \\n &\approx 300 \text{ comments}\end{aligned}$$

From this sample, five major themes emerged. The first theme was artistic praise and performance quality, including appreciation of the lyrics, melody, and emotional delivery. This artistic praise indirectly reinforces the idea that the Somali language transcends political boundaries. Many comments identified the speaker's location, for example, 'I am from Djibouti,' 'I am from Somalia,' or 'I am from Jigjiga', while expressing appreciation for the song. These responses demonstrate that the circulation of poetry, songs, and music continues beyond political borders.

¹ Song available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uktGfQpVEU4>, .

The second theme concerned language ownership and unity (*af/luqad*). Many commenters argued that the Somali language belongs to all Somali people collectively, regardless of political divisions. The poet's use of city names rather than political entities appears to reduce political tension. Commenters frequently referenced cities such as Jigjiga, Djibouti, Muqdisho/Xamar, Hargeysa, Borama, Boosaaso, and Garissa as co-owners of the language, and the commenters were constantly citing the phrases of the song.

Politics was not absent from the discussion. Commenters used terms such as Somalinimo, gobanimo, midnimo, qaran, siyaasad, Somaliland, Soomaaliya, dal, and guul (Somaliness, dignity, unity, state, politics, Somaliland, Somalia, country, victory).

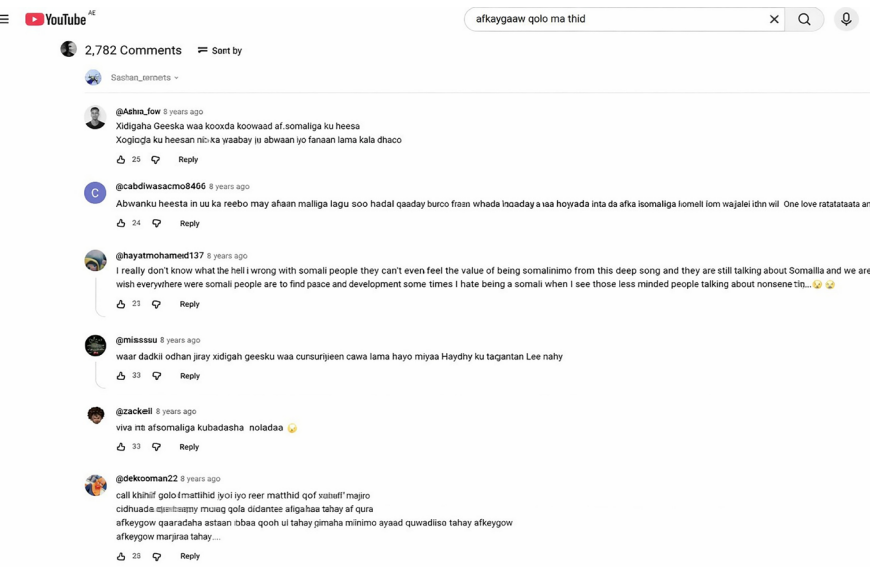


Figure 1. Screenshot of some of the comments that constantly use the phrase 'lies,' 'Oh my tongue, you don't belong to one clan,' and quote the lines mentioned above, in which the poet uses city names to show that the language belongs to the people, people from those cities, while avoiding politics

These linguistic expressions show that people distinguish between political structures and linguistic identity. This distinction also appears in expressions such as 'Qabiil baa kala dilay' (clan division caused fragmentation), which contrasts with the idea that language continues to unify Somali communities.

Anderson's (2006) argument that imagined communities are closely tied to language and script is therefore complicated by the Somali case. Although the nation-state project did not fully succeed, Somali communities remain connected through a shared language. In this respect, the Somali language aligns more closely with Ngũgĩ (1986: 32), who describes language as both culture and the collective memory bank of a people's historical experience. Because Somali people continue to share this language across borders, its existence is not strictly dependent on political structures.

The analysis also shows that when poets navigate political themes in inclusive ways, audiences are more open to engaging with the message. Historical context also matters. Around 2017, much of the Somali region experienced relative stability, which may have influenced the tone of public reception. The idea that language is deeper than politics appears repeatedly in the comments. This pattern is also visible in references to Somali unity. When people refer to 'Shanta Soomaaliyeed,' they refer collectively to Somaliland, Somalia, Djibouti, the Somali Region in Ethiopia, and the NFD in Kenya.

What the poet is doing is keeping to the side of the political conflicts and uses city names rather than national labels. Jaylaani demonstrates that the Somali language can be represented as larger than politics. He does not mention Djibouti as a country, Somaliland as a state, or Somalia as a political entity. Instead, the use of cities allows the language to appear as shared cultural heritage rather than as a symbol of political alignment. In this way, culture becomes a space that operates alongside politics but is not entirely controlled by it.

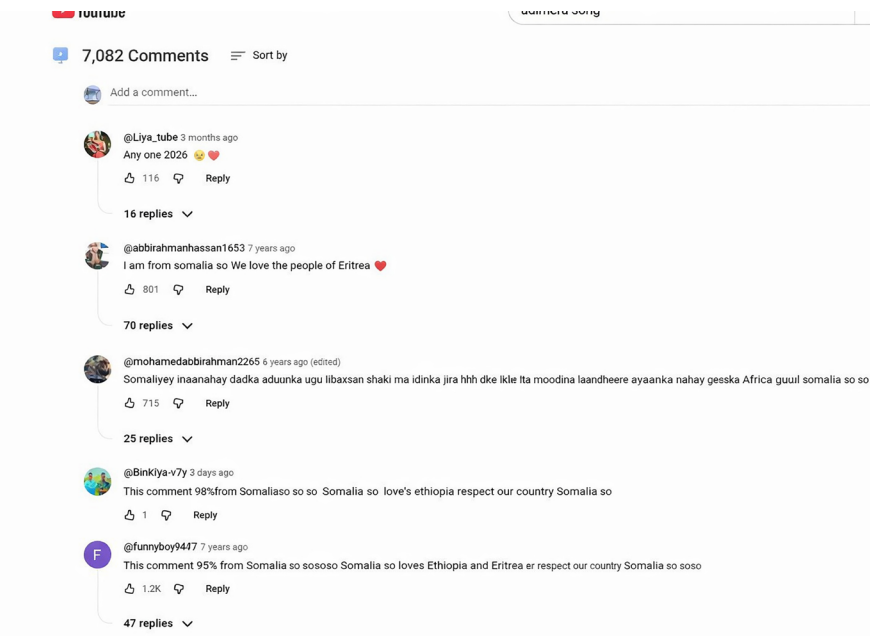
The song above reflects the socio-cultural connections of Somali society and its culture of belonging. This aligns with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986: 30) argument that 'any language has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture.' In the Somali nomadic tradition, communities historically moved in search of better ecological conditions. Because of this mobility, memorization and oral poetry became essential methods of preserving historical memory. Poetry, therefore, occupies a central role in Somali society, shaping how people understand the world and their everyday experiences.

In light of the events of 2018, another young singer, Yared Negu, composed the song *Adimera* (አዲሱ ልግ)² The title *Adimera*

² Song available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2lQl8n1Vcw>, accessed on 12 March 2026.

combines the names of Addis Ababa and Asmara. By using the names of these two cities, the artist reflects a concept similar to what the Somali artist Jaylaani expressed in the song discussed above. This song also received wide acceptance on social media, reaching over 25 million views. It emerged during a new political moment, with lyrics full of love between two communities that politics had separated for decades and whose barriers seemed to be finally disappearing.

The song received more than seven thousand comments, and the comment section shows people from across the globe expressing their support for this new moment of peace and openness between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Lines such as ‘No matter how far we go, love will not disappear’ illustrate the deep connection between these two communities. Because this song generated many comments, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was selected once again, rather than relying only on Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA). However, the comment section was still reviewed to identify the commenters and the themes emerging in their responses. One recurring pattern was that commenters often mentioned their country before expressing their views. Interestingly, the term ‘Somali’ appeared frequently in the comments, with statements such as ‘I love Ethiopian music,’ and ‘It is beautiful to see Addis Ababa and Asmara becoming friends again’.



The connection between social discourse and literature is therefore significant. This case shows that literature, in this instance, could creatively express what politics cannot fully address. Lines such as 'Our wedding, Addis, our return, Asmara (2x); I waited patiently on the day of hope' evoke cultural practices that exist across the Horn of Africa. Because ethnic communities often extend across state borders, marriages across borders have historically been common, reflecting longstanding cultural connections among these communities.

Three main themes emerge from this song. The first theme is love, union, and emotional attachment between the two communities. Lines such as 'I waited patiently on the day of hope' suggest that this relationship carries a moral and almost sacred value that transcends politics. The second theme concerns borders and political separation, and how political decisions disrupt the everyday lives of people who must manage their daily realities. The artist refers to the structural barriers created by borders in lyrics such as 'They closed the border so that we wouldn't talk to him,' 'Adi Addis Ababa came from Asmara,' and 'How much we spent in the desert.' Lines like this indicate a strong relationship that has been disrupted by political boundaries. This experience is connected to broader border politics in the Horn of Africa, where communities in Djibouti and Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia, and Ethiopia and Somalia face similar challenges when crossing borders. As discussed in *Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa*, border politics deeply affect the everyday lives of people in the region. The final theme is the persistence of hope, reflecting the feeling that many people in the Horn of Africa experienced during 2017-2018, when the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea created a sense of optimism. What followed afterward, however, makes that moment appear almost like a dream that was later taken away.

Songs are examples of how cultural production, particularly music, can function as a vernacular political discourse in the Horn of Africa. They narrate cross-border belongings, shared norms, cultures, and histories that often go beyond the political narratives performed by states.

Using YouTube as a digitally mediated space allows the observation of these interactions in real time. The comment section functions as a form of online community in which political and cultural discussions intersect. In this way, digital platforms provide a space where Somali cultural discourse continues to circulate

across borders, contributing to a broader culture of shared identity and communication.

The songs and the examples analysed above, using melodies for political purposes, show that this cultural practice across the region and Africa in general demonstrates that songs and poetry connect the wider region.

It is important to note that music is not the only cultural medium through which political ideas are expressed in the Horn of Africa. Other communities in the region also use language, songs, and poetry as powerful tools to communicate political aspirations and collective memories.

The Eritrean national anthem provides one such example, as it is widely circulated and carries the historical memory of the Eritrean national liberation struggle from 1960 to 1991. The lyrics of the anthem reflect this narrative of sacrifice, endurance, and nation-building:

‘Eritrea, Eritrea, Eritrea,
Her enemy defeated and crushed,
Her sacrifices vindicated by freedom.

Steadfast in her goal,
A symbol of endurance is her name.
Eritrea, the pride of the oppressed,
Proves that truth always prevails.

Eritrea, Eritrea,
In the world, she holds her rightful place.

The noble spirit of freedom brought us here,
We shall work for reconstruction and development.
To crown her with glory and prosperity,
We are entrusted with her future treasure.

Eritrea, Eritrea,
In the world, she holds her rightful place’ (LinkOnLearning, n.d.).

This is an interesting case because Eritrea was under Ethiopian rule from 1960 to 1991. The song, therefore, projected the political aspiration that Eritrea would one day become an independent nation whose people would sing in their own language. This represents a powerful message and illustrates the role of songs,

poetry, and language in the formation of new states. And also, lines like 'Eritrea, the pride of the oppressed' show that political struggles always need art, particularly songs, to mobilize their people (Thomas, 2025). Through such cultural expressions, a new national identity was constructed, largely associated with the Tigrinya language, although not formally excluding other languages within the country. The anthem calls on citizens collectively to build the new state, yet it also reflects which linguistic group held the dominant cultural and political influence during the process of nation-building.

4 Political narratives Across Ethiopia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somalia, and how they use propaganda

This book chapter focuses on the last ten years and examines the major political narratives that the nations of the Horn of Africa were building. In some cases, it goes back to history to make sense of what is happening and its strategic connections. In April 2018, a young and charismatic leader, Abiy Ahmed, became Prime Minister of Ethiopia, the most populous country in the Horn of Africa. He introduced a philosophy, which some have described as a form of 'political language', known as *Medemer*, an Amharic term whose meaning is not fixed but is generally understood as 'coming together' or 'synergy.' This philosophy of 'togetherness' appeared to gain traction during its initial year. However, it has also been subject to significant criticism. As one critical perspective notes, 'Medemer is a hell for the ordinary citizen of Ethiopia' (Assefa, 2024: 121). Despite this critique, the present chapter examines Abiy Ahmed's speeches and political engagements, arguing that the element of 'togetherness' is indeed embedded within his discourse. The central question, however, remains whether this philosophy is sustainable or whether it ultimately risks backfiring.

In June 2018, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki signed a historic peace agreement in Asmara, which resulted in Abiy Ahmed winning the Nobel Peace Prize (British Broadcasting Company, 2018; Nobel Prize, 2019). The speech that Abiy Ahmed (2019) delivered after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize was strategically constructed in a way that many people across the Horn of Africa could relate to. When he states, 'I was a young soldier when war broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea. I witnessed firsthand the ugliness of war in frontline battles,' these lines carry two important messages.

First, they discursively communicate that he comes from a background like that of many ordinary people in the region. Soldiers in the Horn of Africa often receive very limited income, and by emphasizing his past as a soldier, he symbolically signals that he understands the economic and social struggles experienced by ordinary citizens. In this way, the speech rhetorically constructs the impression that a person who understands the lived realities of the population is now in power.

Second, the statement also sends a regional and cross-border message. Referring to the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, he acknowledges a conflict that affected people on both sides of the border. This framing allows civilians across the region to see him as someone who understands their shared experiences of war and insecurity. As he emphasizes his role in ending the hostility between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the narrative implicitly suggests that he may also contribute to broader regional stability. Through this strategy, he constructs two key elements of political legitimacy: relatability and sincerity.

This sense of emotional connection is discursively reinforced through his use of affective language. When he declares, 'I also accept this award on behalf of Africans and citizens of the world for whom the dream of peace has often turned into a nightmare of war,' he draws attention to the lived experience of conflict. The contrast between the dream of peace and the nightmare of war resonates strongly with populations living in conflict-affected regions. The speech gradually builds its argument by moving from his personal experience as a soldier to the broader human consequences of war on children, women, and elderly people, and finally to his role as a radio operator attached to an Ethiopian army unit. Vividly describing the horrors of war, he presents himself as someone whose knowledge of conflict is grounded in personal experience rather than abstract theory.

Through this narrative, he communicates that he speaks about peace from first-hand experience. The speech then transitions from these personal memories to the potential benefits of peace. When he states, 'For you to have a peaceful night, your neighbour shall have a peaceful night as well,' he introduces a regional logic of interdependence. This proverb suggests that security and stability cannot exist in isolation; rather, peace in one country depends on peace among neighbouring states. In this way, the speech discursively positions him as a leader committed to peace not only within Ethiopia but across the wider Horn of Africa.

Early reactions to his leadership were largely positive. For example, Nigatu and Abbink (2019) observed that 'it is no exaggeration to say that his first public appearance evoked joy and positive emotion not only among members of parliament but also among the wider public,' portraying him as a reformist leader who inspired optimism. However, later academic assessments became more critical. Scholars such as Yemisrach Teshome, Yayew Genet Chekol, and Abebe Yirga Ayenalem (2021) from Bahir Dar University argued that many of the promises associated with his early reforms were not fully realized. Similarly, Moa Berming, in the study *From Nobel Peace Prize Winner to War Criminal*, highlights the dramatic shift in perceptions of his leadership. Reports from the International Crisis Group also noted that while his promises were ambitious, the country later experienced increased ethnic conflict and a rise in national debt, which reached approximately USD 24 billion in 2019.

The mismatch of his actions and policies that he promised resulted in a narrative change. What initially appeared to be a powerful discourse against the horrors of war and conflict gradually became the reality of the Ethiopian people. The contrast between the hopeful rhetoric of the Nobel Peace Prize speech and subsequent political realities illustrates how political narratives can change over time as leaders confront the complexities of governance and conflict. Simultaneously, Abiy Ahmed shifted his political focus toward playing the role of a regional mediator in the Horn of Africa, presenting himself as a diplomatic actor capable of resolving conflicts between neighbouring states. This regional mediation role developed while local politics inside Ethiopia were becoming increasingly polarized and ethnic conflicts were growing in several regions. The coexistence of these two trajectories suggests a political strategy in which external diplomacy and regional peacebuilding can function as a source of legitimacy, even while internal political tensions remain unresolved. This political framework allows leaders to project stability and authority beyond national borders while domestic political challenges intensify.

On 5 September 2018, a Tripartite Agreement was signed between Abiy Ahmed, Prime Minister of Ethiopia; Isaias Afwerki, President of Eritrea, and Mohamed Abdullahi 'Farmajo', President of Somalia at the time. The objective was economic, political, and security collaboration (International Crisis Group, 2019). Even though Djibouti was not involved in that meeting, the region

seemed to become full of hope that the conflicts in the Horn of Africa were about to end and that the borders between Ethiopia and Eritrea would be completely open. The political narrative that the Ethiopian Government was sending was one promising a young leader who was pro-peace and development.

On 11 February 2020, Abiy Ahmed again mediated a meeting between former President Muuse Biihi Abdi of Somaliland and President Mohamed Abdullahi 'Farmajo' of Somalia (Horn Diplomat, 2020). Abiy Ahmed showed the narrative of being the peace builder in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia, being the centre of the African Union and the most populous nation in the Horn of Africa, looked as if it were also taking the role of political mediator. From 2016 until 2020, before the Tigray War happened, the Horn of Africa looked like it was building a new story, a story of coming together and moving forward (Clapham, 2017).

In the same year, on 14 June 2020, Abiy Ahmed and President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh of Djibouti mediated another round of talks between Somaliland and Somalia in Djibouti (Horn Diplomat, 2020). The continuation of Abiy Ahmed's involvement, and Djibouti being the place where the official meeting happened, built the illustration that the Horn was solving its problems. Some of the things that the Horn of Africa has been seeing for the last decade are that drastic changes happen within days, and those political moves have a fatal impact. Abiy Ahmed changed from a peace narrative to a war narrative when the Tigray War (2020-2022) happened (International Crisis Group, 2021).

The Ethiopian Government built a new narrative of defending federalism. The country is ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse, which makes Ethiopian federalism different from other forms of federalism in the world. The existence of the current Ethiopian state is built around federalism and the idea that all regional states must stay together. If one leaves, it risks the existence of Ethiopia, as there are many ethnic-based militias such as the Oromo Liberation Front and the Ogaden National Liberation Front, which now has an agreement with the Somali regional government (Clapham, 2017).

Because the existence of Ethiopia depends on federalism, local media framed Tigray as a group that wanted to destroy the nation, while international media framed it as the government destroying its own people and violating human rights (International Crisis Group, 2021).

The political shifts that have happened over the last ten years in the Horn seem very influential and represent a region in search of solutions; however, they have somehow ended up becoming more conflictual. For instance, on 1 January 2024, only a few days after the Djibouti peace talks, when the relationship collapsed, Somaliland signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Ethiopia (Reuters, 2024). These moves upset Somalia and Djibouti because they had two different impacts on both. Ethiopia is the main user of Djibouti's ports, with more than 95% of its imports and exports passing through Djibouti (World Bank, 2022). If the Ethiopia-Somaliland agreement had worked, it would have had significant economic consequences for Djibouti.

For Somalia, it would have had a major impact on the narrative that Somaliland is part of Somalia, a narrative that has been built since the 1960 union between Somaliland and Somalia (Hoehne, 2015).

It might have been a relief for Eritrea because Ethiopia's search for access to the sea could have been met by Somaliland, which might reduce Eritrean concerns that Ethiopia could attempt to capture one of its port cities. If Somaliland provides port access to Ethiopia, it would be economically beneficial to both countries, which are already cooperating through the DP World agreement involving Somaliland, the UAE, and Ethiopia (Rift Valley Institute, 2017).

As noted in the literature, restrictions on political space and governance challenges in the region can further complicate such external engagements (Mohamed, 2016).

Historically, Djibouti has served as a diplomatic hub for the Horn of Africa. Former President Hassan Gouled Aptidon played a key role in lobbying for the formation of the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD) in January 1986 to address regional crises and conflicts between Ethiopia and the Somali Republic at that time (now Somalia and Somaliland) (IGAD, 1986; Bereketeab 2013).

Djibouti has continued to maintain this role as a diplomatic centre of the Horn of Africa, including hosting the Arta Conference in 1991, which brought together Somali actors for reconciliation efforts.

Apart from political mediation in regional conflicts, one of the most important cultural and literary contributions of Radio Television of Djibouti (RTD) is the programme *Sirta Erayga* ('The Secret of the Word'). This programme, which spans around thirty two volumes, features interviews with some of the most prominent

Somali poets, singers, and playwrights, who share their life histories (Lilius, 1998). This initiative is particularly significant for Somali literature because it was recorded during a period when much of the Somali world was experiencing civil war. As such, the program has preserved knowledge and cultural memory that might otherwise have been lost.

The *Sirta Erayga* programme gave some poets of that time two important opportunities. First, during the military government in Somalia, many poets could not meet or publicly discuss their poetry, especially when it was critical of the state. This program provided a space in Djibouti where poets could freely express and reflect on their work, particularly because it did not directly challenge the government. Second, RTD stepped in as a guardian of Somali literature at a time when much of the Somali community was experiencing conflict. Although RTD is not limited to Somali speakers, the reason this programme is significant is that it reflects cross-cultural engagement and demonstrates that even when politics fail in the region, culture continues to flourish, often just beyond the borders.

The fragility of the political structures of the Horn is visible, while culture sustains and manoeuvres across the region, consistently finding a home in neighbouring countries that share similar language and culture.

The region has also become a hub for emerging regional political powers, as Djibouti hosts multiple foreign military bases (Dubois, 2018), which makes the region vulnerable to the emergence of new proxy wars.

On 26 December 2025, Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel, formally recognized Somaliland, a state that has claimed independence since 1991. Somaliland is a country in search of international recognition, and in 2025, it showed a willingness to take extreme measures, such as accepting recognition from Israel, at a time when the United States and Israel are politically more isolated than before.

If Israel were to request a military base in Berbera, which is directly opposite Yemen, and if the Houthis were to block the Red Sea, as Iran has previously done in the Strait of Hormuz, this could bring a more dangerous war into the Horn.

Even if the United States agrees to recognize and defend Somaliland, this will still add to the conflict in a region that has been volatile for many years.

Even though the Somaliland Government has not yet built a clear political narrative around this new relationship, other than stating that 'we will make use of our strategic location,' Berbera has constantly been described as having the potential to become a global hub for business because of its location (Mohamed, 2026). Can this become a reality, or would it be another disaster that adds to the regional conflict?

This shows that the political narratives that are building in this region change unpredictably, because there are also external factors influencing what is going on in the region.

Sometimes local politics can also be unpredictable, and changes of government happen frequently. These new governments often go in directions that are not like those of previous governments. For example, in Somalia, when President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud came to power, his slogan was 'Soomaali heshiis ah, dunidana heshiis la ah' ('Somalis at peace with themselves and at peace with the world'). This slogan built the narrative that he is a peace builder, but the Laascaanood war between Somaliland and SSC forces, and his visit to Laascaanood, intensified tensions (International Crisis Group, 2023).

In the Horn of Africa, political leaders often adopt the narrative of peace, *nabad* in Somali, *selam* in Amharic, *nagaa* in Oromo, and *naba* in Afar, as a political strategy, even while engaging in policies or conflicts that contradict this discourse.

There could be several reasons why these words are constantly used. People in the Horn need peace to build their societies; when governments provide security, people can thrive. For this reason, 'peace' becomes a narrative rather than an actual condition.

Second, these countries have interests that are deeply intertwined. If one country is at war, it has a huge impact on neighbouring countries. When a neighbouring state is at war, refugees often move across borders because people who share culture, languages, ethnicity, and religion live just across those borders, as Kenya still hosts many Somali refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2024).

Instability can easily spread across the region. Somali stability is particularly important because Somalia and Somaliland control a large part of the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean access routes, which are among the most strategic maritime corridors in the world.

Apart from their strategic locations and the interconnectedness of identities, another interesting point is language and cultural policies of these nations.

The Ethiopian Constitution of 1995 is based on ethno-linguistic federalism, which allows languages other than Amharic to function as official working languages of regional governments. For example, in the Oromo region, Afaan Oromo is the working language of the government; in the Tigray region, it is Tigrinya; in the Amhara region, Amharic; in the Somali region, Somali; and in the Afar region, the Afar language (Ethiopia, 1995). This system gives regional governments political power because the political narrative is that if one belongs to a particular language, one belongs to that region. This model works for a state like Ethiopia, which is a multi-ethnic country.

In contrast, the Somali people share one language, and this language has one official written script that was formalized in 1972. Somali functions as the administrative and educational language in the current political structures of the Somali Region in Ethiopia, as well as in Somalia and Somaliland.

Meanwhile, Article One of the Djibouti Constitution of Djibouti (1992) states that 'its official languages shall be Arabic and French.' Even though Somali is widely spoken, it is still not an official language.

In Eritrea, the official languages are Tigrinya and Arabic, while other ethnic languages are recognized.

The point is that languages carry political meaning and political standing.

In the case of Ethiopia, the system suggests openness to multiple languages because language reflects the identity of a community, which is compatible with its federal system.

The Somali language, however, is still politically connected to the idea that the Somali people should have one political unity, and it continues to reflect the idea of a greater Somali republic, which is why the analysed songs above show that people's comments still emphasize 'unity.'

In Djibouti, the language policy shows that the legacy of colonial rule remains visible, where French represents the superior power. In the case of Eritrea, Tigrinya functions as the dominant ruling language, while Arabic reflects the political influence within the country's politics.

5 Conclusion

Taken together, the 21st-century politics and current situation of the Horn of Africa raise an important question: could these strong cultural and linguistic connections become a bridge that would help build peace in the region, or will the Horn continue to sustain the patterns of division and conflict that have long characterized it?

Across these several layers of analysis, a clear vacuum emerges that reveals a region culturally vibrant through songs and poetry. However, the strength of cultural expression simultaneously exposes the weakness of political institutions.

Governments attempt to control the narratives circulating beyond their borders, but songs and poetry remain difficult to regulate and subject to the government's rules and regulations. These cultural forms continue to move across communities and territories, carrying meanings that often exist outside formal political discourse.

The emergence of digital spaces has created new arenas of public discussion, which is something that is new to the study of this region, as the Internet didn't have borders, and comment sections on platforms such as YouTube allow individuals to express interpretations and opinions that they fully control.

While the academic study of such comments has limitations, particularly the issue of availability, since data can disappear if a video is removed, these materials remain valuable sources of publicly available discourse. Digital spaces also reveal political fragmentation, as they expose interpretations and ideological expressions that formal politics often fails to capture. In many cases, users distinguish clearly between politics and belonging, emphasizing that language and cultural identity are larger than political divisions.

At the same time, the constant narrative of 'peace,' repeatedly invoked by political leaders, appears to function as an attempt to stabilize a politically unstable region. Language policies in this region have operated, and are still operating, as mechanisms through which states attempt to consolidate legitimacy and authority. However, songs are working as a counter-narrative to politics.

Sometimes politics and languages negotiate with each other, and sometimes they are in conflict, which impacts the politics of the Horn.

In conclusion, the Horn of Africa occupies a position of significant importance to global trade, particularly through its proximity to major maritime routes such as the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Gulf of Aden.

Historically rich and culturally diverse, the region nevertheless remains politically fragile, a condition that continues to contribute to recurring instability.

This combination of strong cultural connectivity and fragile political structures reflects a broader strategic vacuum in which cultural narratives, language, and public discourse continue to shape regional identity and political imagination.

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