



13/10/2026

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

This analysis is part of the strategy paper:

The Horn of Africa: The New Center of the African World

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.

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

MALDONADO RODRIGUEZ, Daniel. *Turbulent governance in the Horn of Africa: the fragmentation of state projects*. Analysis Paper IEEE 68/2026.

***NOTE:** The views expressed in the Analysis Papers are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

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 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

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

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.

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.

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).



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

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

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 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

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 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.

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

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.

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.

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 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.

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

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.



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

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.

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.



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

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.

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 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.

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

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

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 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.

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

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.

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).

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.

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 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

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.

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.

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).

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.

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

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).

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

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

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

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.

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 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.

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

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.

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).

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.

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.

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.

*Daniel Maldonado Rodríguez**

Security and international conflicts analyst