Red Sea Peace Initiatives: Saudi Arabia’s Role in the Eritrea-Ethiopia Rapprochement
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The Jeddah Peace Pact, which was finalized in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on September 16, 2018, led to the normalization of ties between the State of Eritrea and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Back-channel international diplomatic efforts to conclude the pact, led by the African Union (AU), the United States of America, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), were remarkably successful in light of the failure of all previous international mediatory efforts to restore peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The pact was agreed to after decades of festering conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia and is designed to establish peace between these two nations and in the Horn of Africa region generally. It results from an urgent need for peace at the local level and multilateral regional initiatives to build stronger Gulf-Horn connections. Additionally, the pact gives Saudi Arabia a unique opportunity to facilitate its implementation and build collective Red Sea partnerships, through measures discussed in this paper.

An Overview of Previous Saudi Peace Initiatives between Eritrea and Ethiopia

Separated from Africa by 355 kilometers at the broadest point of the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia is well situated to encourage Eritrea and Ethiopia to abandon conflict and promote cooperation across this strategic waterway. Historic shipping routes allow the flow of trade as well as cultural and political influences that bond the Kingdom with the two Horn of Africa nations. Riyadh has used this capital to build and sustain the peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The Kingdom’s historic contacts with Ethiopia and Eritrea predate the latter’s independence in 1993. In 1948, Riyadh established formal diplomatic relations with Addis Ababa and supported subsequent international peace plans between Ethiopia and independence-seeking Eritrea. In 1950, United Nations (UN) Resolution 390A(v) granted Eritrea an autonomous federated status after ending the British Military Administration over Eritrea in 1952. However, tensions
between Ethiopia and Egypt over a British-sponsored treaty that granted Cairo vast control over Nile Basin waters delayed peace plans in the Horn. In 1962, Ethiopia disregarded a federal act to annex Eritrea as its fourteenth province.(1)

The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and its breakaway political factions fought for independence in the following decades.(2) Meanwhile, threatening Pan-Arab socialist trends emerging in Egypt drew Addis Ababa closer to Riyadh in the late 1960s. In later years, despite the rise to power of the Marxist-Leninist Derg regime (1974–1987)—known officially as the Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia—Addis Ababa sought Saudi assistance to ease tensions with Eritrea. But Derg policy to reject Ethiopia’s religious and ethnic identities led to the outbreak of the Somali-Ethiopian Ogaden War (1977–1978) and delayed the peace with Eritrea.(3)

In 1975, the Suez Canal reopened after the conclusion of peace talks between Egypt and Israel, which helped to advance Cairo’s prominence in Africa but isolated Ethiopia in the process. Addis Ababa–Riyadh relations remained strong in the face of the threat of radical Islam following Iran’s revolution in 1979. To address the challenge, Riyadh strengthened its bonds with Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti. But the political influence of radical segments of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), an offshoot of the ELF, forced Riyadh to cease its efforts to reduce tensions between Addis Ababa and Asmara.(4)

In the 1980s, Russia’s influence in the Horn bolstered the position of the Marxists in Ethiopia. In 1981, Ethiopia made security agreements with the socialist governments of Libya and South Yemen. In 1986, the ascendency of the National Umma Party in Sudan’s parliament led to Khartoum’s support for Eritrean rebels. Feeling pressured, Ethiopia signed an agreement with Somalia to end the Ogaden conflict. By 1989, the ouster of the Umma Party undermined Sudan’s support for Eritrea. Seeing an opportunity, Addis Ababa sought Riyadh’s help to resolve the conflict with Asmara.

Renewed Momentum toward Peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia

Ethiopia accepted Eritrea’s right to self-determination in 1991. After gaining independence two years later through a UN plebiscite, Eritrea joined the United Nations, the Organization of African Unity (OAU; later renamed the African Union [AU]), and the Arab League. The temporary peace allowed Addis Ababa to enlist Riyadh’s support to ease tensions between the Ethiopian Christian highlanders and Muslims in the lowlands bordering Somalia during a renewed Ogaden insurgency (1994–2019).\(^5\)

In 1995, Ethiopia set up a system of ethnic federalism to contain domestic instability, but its border dispute with Eritrea continued to simmer. In 1998, the final closing of Eritrea’s borders ended Ethiopia’s access to the Red Sea and pushed Asmara toward international isolation. Gulf–Addis Ababa ties remained strong in this period, given that Ethiopia represented Africa’s second most populous country and had a huge market potential and Djibouti continued to provide access to over 95 percent of Ethiopia’s trade in the Red Sea.

In May 1998, Eritrean military forces crossed into Ethiopia in the area around Badme. The resulting conflict lasted two decades, claimed nearly 1 million lives, and displaced more than 650,000 people. In July 1999, the OAU introduced a “Framework Agreement and the Modalities for its Implementation” to end the border conflict. On June 18, 2000, an “Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities” was signed in Algiers (known as the “Algiers Agreement”), which came with a promise by Eritrea to withdraw forces from Ethiopia and an offer of binding arbitration through newly established neutral boundary and claims commissions. The commissions settled the border dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia through consultations with the UN Secretary-General (UNSG). A permanent court of arbitration subsequently awarded Eritrea most of the disputed territory.\(^6\)

Ethiopia contested the terms of the dispute settlement and refused to accept them until June 2018. After September 11, 2001, Addis Ababa–Washington ties were strengthened in an effort

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\(^5\) Ibíd., 65–72.

to enlist Ethiopia’s army to aid in the war on terror and to fight the resurgence of militant Islam in the Ogaden region and Somalia. In 2002, the United Nations backed a boundary demarcation mechanism to settle the Eritrean-Ethiopian dispute but Addis Ababa contested the results. In 2003, the UN-backed Ethiopian-Eritrean Boundary Commission (EEBC) issued a final ruling, which Ethiopia rejected. The border question remained in dispute through November 2007, when the EEBC concluded the demarcation phase of the Algiers Agreement, recommending that Eritrea take 1,000 kilometers between the two borders.\(^{(7)}\) In response, Ethiopia insisted that Eritrea would breach its international obligations by accepting the recommendation.\(^{(8)}\) By December, an estimated 4,000 Eritrean troops were stationed in a demilitarized zone under terms stipulated by EEBC and another 120,000 troops were stationed along the borders. Ethiopia maintained 100,000 troops along its borders, leading to a prolonged state of “no war, no peace,” or a “frozen conflict,” with Eritrea.\(^{(9)}\)

In 2010, Qatar’s efforts to mediate between Addis Ababa and Asmara facilitated a temporary border settlement.\(^{(10)}\) However, in 2011, antigovernment uprisings in North Africa led to the exchange of mutual charges of sponsoring terrorism and inciting regime change between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The two countries, meanwhile, remained closed societies under the respective rule of the Eritrean People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) and the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

In 2012, Addis Ababa restored its relations with Doha, raising hopes that Qatar’s mediation might work. The two capitals had severed ties in 2008, when Doha had helped Eritrea resolve a border tension over the Doumeira Islands with Djibouti. Still, Ethiopia questioned Qatar’s closer contacts with Eritrea and Sudan, Al Jazeera’s frequent coverage of the Ogaden Insurgency, and Doha’s provision of financial incentives to rival Somalia. As a result, Ethiopia refused to grant Qatar leeway to reach markets in the Africa trade bloc known as the Inter-


Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and drew closer to the Kingdom. By 2013, facing a rapid economic meltdown, Eritrea moved toward building better ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE as well.\(^{(11)}\)

Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, meanwhile, reached out to the semiautonomous regions of Somaliland, Galmidug, Hirshabelle, Jubaland, and Puntland.\(^{(12)}\) The outreach helped secure vital navigation in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean as antipiracy and counterterrorism measures were called for to fight the al-Shabab militant group, which controlled Mogadishu before being forced out of power in 2006. In 2013, the Riyadh-based Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) developed a collective strategy toward the Horn when Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister, Saud al-Faisal bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, proposed that the organization develop a comprehensive, integrated approach to incorporate the Horn countries’ economic, cultural, and security interests into Gulf visions for growth and development. In June, the GCC foreign ministers met in Jeddah to place the Horn of Africa as a permanent item for consideration in future peace talks with the region.\(^{(13)}\)

In 2015, the outbreak of conflict in Yemen renewed the Gulf’s interest in restoring the peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Backed by Iran, the Houthis threatened to disrupt shipping in the Red Sea. In response, Saudi Arabia and the UAE encouraged the two Horn capitals to join in regional security arrangements with Djibouti, Somalia and its self-declared autonomous regions. On September 4, Riyadh restored its ties with Eritrea after the latter agreed to talks with the UAE with the goal of developing military outposts to contain the Iranian naval presence in the Red Sea. When the UAE agreed to develop the Assab and Massawa ports, Eritrea proceeded to contribute forces to an emerging Saudi-led military coalition in Yemen.\(^{(14)}\)


In January 2016, Saudi Arabia severed its ties with Iran. Djibouti, Somalia, and several GCC states either ended or downgraded their diplomatic ties with Tehran as well. By 2017, Qatar’s mediation efforts between Eritrea and Ethiopia collapsed when, in midyear, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt formed a coalition to sanction Doha. Eritrea supported the quartet, citing its greater clout and economic potential, and said it would abandon territorial claims over Djibouti. In response, Qatar withdrew its 450 peacekeeping troops from the Djibouti-Eritrea border in June.\(^\text{15}\)

The emerging Gulf-Horn strategy enabled Saudi Arabia, along with Egypt, to expedite the formation of a nascent Red Sea Security Council initiative, which held a first meeting in December 2017. The initiative engaged the Red Sea littoral states but excluded Ethiopia as a nonlittoral state. Eritrea did not take part in the meeting of the council, which promised to work on a range of thematic subjects including conflict resolution, environmental protection, and the development of transportation infrastructure.\(^\text{16}\)

As Gulf investments in the Horn increased, Ethiopia became Africa’s fastest growing economy by 2018. Taking advantage of the momentum, Addis Ababa backed IGAD’s needed institutional reforms to build Gulf-Horn ventures and accepted the rulings of the boundary commission. But Eritrea refused to work on a peace deal and instead imposed an indefinite national military service to secure its borders. Meanwhile, tensions in the Horn increased when Addis Ababa failed to reconcile its differences with Cairo over downstream water loss and waste resulting from a contested 1999 Nile Basin Initiative.

Facing protests at home, Ethiopia’s prime minister, Haidemariam Desalegn, left office in April 2018, stating the need for reforms in his country. But peace with Eritrea stalled because the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), a force in Ethiopian politics that had drawn early inspiration as a movement from the Eritrean EPLF, formed a coalition with the EPRDF, which


was working to isolate Eritrea. During this period, Ethiopia remained mired in conflict with other local armed groups, including the Patriotic Ginbot (G7), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). (17)

On June 5, Ethiopia’s new prime minister, Abiy Ahmed Ali, announced that his country would return the land that Eritrea claimed as its own, including the town of Badme and the border regions inhabited by an ethnic group known as the Irob people. On June 26, Eritrea sent a delegation led by its foreign minister, Osman Saleh Mohammed, to Ethiopia to inaugurate the first bilateral meeting between the two countries in over a decade. On July 9, during a two-day meeting in Asmara and following a coffee ceremony, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki signed a Declaration of Peace and Friendship that promised to uphold the findings of the EEBC border demarcation and end the war (1998–2000) as well as the border conflict (2000–2018). On July 23, President Afwerki arrived in Jeddah to discuss regional issues and investment opportunities with King Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud. (18)

On September 16, 2018, Eritrea and Ethiopia concluded the Jeddah Peace Pact at a summit held by King Salman. International and regional leaders present at the summit included the UNSG, Antonio Guterres, and the AU Commission Chairman, Moussa Faki Mahamat. In recognition of their statesmanship, King Salman awarded President Afwerki and Prime Minister Ahmed Ali the Kingdom’s highest medal, the Order of King Abd al-Aziz. (19) Speaking at a press conference, Secretary-General Guterres praised the pact, and said it brought a “wind of hope” through the Horn of Africa. (20)

Eritrea and Ethiopia immediately opened their embassies in each other’s capitals, resumed direct flights, and reopened the phone lines as well as two land-border crossings. The pact facilitated

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the signing of a second peace deal in Saudi Arabia, which normalized relations between Djibouti and Eritrea, after the two Horn countries had severed relations over a border conflict in 2008.\(^{(21)}\) Djibouti’s president, Ismail Oman Guelleh, confirmed that the agreement signed with Eritrea, after leaders from the two countries held their first face-to-face meeting in more than a decade in Jeddah, materialized because of Saudi Arabia’s commitment to promoting stability in the Horn of Africa.\(^{(22)}\)

## Consolidating Peace in Eritrea and Ethiopia

Sustaining peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia calls for strategies that stabilize the two countries and promote collective Horn partnerships. Saudi Arabia’s proximity to the two Horn countries, as compared to that of other Gulf or international actors, enables the Kingdom to offer the two states economic incentives and options to expand the collective regional security. The steps are designed to ensure stability in the Horn region, given that it has one of the world’s largest growth rates in gross domestic products (GDP), and improve security in the Red Sea. The following sections outline the economic, commercial, and security initiatives to ensure the success of the Jeddah Peace Pact that have been taken to date by the Kingdom.

### Economic Initiatives

Economic incentives lead to sizable Saudi investments in the Horn. Since 2008, the global economic crisis has specifically triggered a surge in the acquisition of agricultural land in Africa in an effort to obtain Gulf food security.\(^{(23)}\) In total, with the aid of strong oil markets, the Gulf states invested USD 13 billion in the Horn region between 2000 and 2017.\(^{(24)}\) In general, Gulf investors have had positive work experiences in Eritrea and Ethiopia and have promoted direct bilateral state-to-state cooperation, multilateral GCC economic deals, business-to-business partnerships, people-to-people contacts, cultural exchanges, and educational opportunities.

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\(^{(22)}\) Lons, “Saudi Arabia and the UAE Look to Africa.”


Other investments, including farmland purchases, have provided the Gulf with access to agricultural hubs and the livestock industry in the Horn.\(^{(25)}\)

Saudi Arabia’s National Transformation Plan and Vision 2030, designed to address a post-oil economy, is intended to accelerate its economic reforms and facilitate the transfer of technical and financial know-how across the Red Sea. A common Red Sea heritage and concerns about its environmental preservation, as well as the need to generate employment, motivate Saudi Arabia to work with Eritrea and Ethiopia to build social and intellectual capital and draw on regional resources to avoid the waste of human potential in all three countries.\(^{(26)}\)

However, identifying the right financial and investment packages to encourage the elite to commit to peace in Eritrea and Ethiopia is a challenge. As an example, the Jeddah Peace Pact established joint special economic zones between Eritrea and Ethiopia to encourage trade. Although trade resumed between Addis Ababa and Asmara, border tensions delayed partnerships and opportunities for business travel.\(^{(27)}\) In December 2018, Asmara closed its border crossings with Ethiopia after protestors in Eritrea questioned the merits of the peace deal. Eritrea’s leaders in particular are concerned that Ethiopia’s stronger economy will take over the Eritrean markets.\(^{(28)}\)

Cash-stripped Ethiopia must transform a subsistence-based agricultural economy, on which most of its population depends, into a robust agricultural, industrial, and service-oriented economy with a vibrant private sector. As a result, the country has opened up its aviation and energy sectors to private investors and started to work closely with Saudi Arabia to boost agricultural production. Since only 2 percent of Saudi land is arable, the Kingdom encourages Addis Ababa–Cairo talks to redistribute the flow of the Nile River to support Ethiopian agricultural projects.

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\(^{(25)}\) Aluwaisheg, “Gulf Nations Can Help Harness Horn of Africa’s ‘Wind of Hope.’”


To support Ethiopia’s broader economic plans in 2019, the Kingdom offered the country a loan of USD 140 million to develop roads, energy infrastructures, and health programs; contributed an additional USD 500 million to rescue Ethiopia’s Central Bank; and helped Addis Ababa fund its diplomatic service programs and foreign aid budget.\(^{(29)}\) These funds allow Ethiopia to focus on urgent social reforms. Addis Ababa has established councils, reviewed civil laws, achieved gender balance in the cabinet, and taken steps to be inclusive of its multiethnic society of nearly 100 million people from eighty different ethnic groups.

Eritrea’s sense of isolation slows the pace of economic reforms. The country imposes travel bans on its citizens, most of whom work at low-paid jobs, suffer from food scarcity, and face compulsory national military service. Saudi Arabia ensures the elites’ commitment to peace by offering Eritrea opportunities to transform the country into a Red Sea tourism and trade hub, measures that are designed to help generate local employment and distribute wealth. In November 2018, the Kingdom helped remove international sanctions on Eritrea that had been put in place in response to its support for rebels in Somalia in 2009, a measure that Ethiopia and the United States supported and that enabled the Kingdom to offer Eritrea financial aid and fuel supplies. In April 2019, Minister Osman Saleh Mohammed traveled to Riyadh to attract trade and investments. Two days later, President Afwerki sent a letter to King Salman outlining proposals to enhance bilateral and regional cooperation.\(^{(30)}\) In August, Saudi Arabia’s commander of the military coalition in Yemen, Lt. Gen. Prince Fahad bin Turki Abd al-Aziz met with President Afwerki to discuss diversifying Eritrea’s economy and moving it away from oil by launching several mega-projects along the Red Sea. The plans are designed in tandem with Vision 2030 to move beyond oil and toward economic diversification. The Saudi-led projects, which are funded with USD 500 million, include building business zones and tourism destinations along Eritrea’s coasts.\(^{(31)}\) Moreover, the

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Saudi-owned Farasan islands, off the shore of Jizan and positioned across the Dahlaks, could see a revival of trade with Eritrea and Ethiopia. Though the area was not heavily inhabited before, it can serve as a tourism magnet, given its rare historic sites.(32) In February 2020, the Eritrean president met with King Salman to consolidate the new economic agreements.(33)

**Port Development Initiatives**

Saudi Arabia has the longest shores on the Red Sea, through which 20 percent of world trade and 70 percent of Saudi cargo flows.(34) This unique position allows the Kingdom to expand port operations, keeping in mind the need to extend the Vision 2030 investment initiatives to Africa’s Vision 2030 projects. Saudi commercial investments in Assab and Massawa, in particular, can link Pakistan’s Gwadar Port to Africa through the Saudi port of Jizan, as well as with China’s One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiatives.(35) The investments can further help Addis Ababa reach port gateways in the Red Sea and diversify seaport revenues. Ethiopia has already concluded port agreements with Sudan and Djibouti and acquired a 19 percent concession in the Dubai Port World (DP) operations in Berbera in Somaliland, which will connect by road to the Ethiopian border town of Togachale.(36) Port operations will also help the Kingdom bypass the Strait of Hormuz when sending out its oil exports. The UAE plans to build oil pipelines between Assab and Addis Ababa.(37) Saudi Arabia’s Aramco is itself invested in projects to expand east-west crude pipeline corridors from the Kingdom’s Eastern province to Yanbu on the Red Sea.(38)

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(32) Werner, “Forging Plowshares in Eritrea.”
The differential advantage of Saudi Arabia’s location on the Red Sea allows the Kingdom to complement UAE port investments in the Horn as well. To this end, in December 2019, the Saudi Ports Authority Mawani signed concession contracts with DP and the Red Sea Gateway Terminal to use the Jeddah Islamic Port as a major transshipment hub in the Red Sea.\(^{(39)}\) Combined Saudi and UAE port operations in the Horn will increase the capacity of the Dubai’s Jebel ‘Ali Port. In 2020, DP World agreed to upgrade Eritrea’s Assab into a container and free-zone commercial port.\(^{(40)}\) In addition to operating the Assab port, the UAE won a contract to develop Berbera in Somaliland and expand its presence in the Somali region of Puntland, where DP World Subsidiary P&O operates ports.\(^{(41)}\) Djibouti controls the Doraleh Container Terminal but will also need to work on resolving its legal dispute over the port with DP in light of previous agreements signed in 2016 to connect Doraleh to the Massawa Port.\(^{(42)}\)

**Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Initiative**

Saudi Arabia’s drive for national food security and hydropower has encouraged Ethiopia to find a solution to end its dispute with Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which was constructed in an early phase in 2011 at a cost of USD 4.7 billion, despite failed US and World Bank efforts to come to an agreement. Egypt depends on 80 percent of the water tributaries from the Blue Nile in Ethiopia. Addis Ababa aims to control half the Nile’s flow to power Africa’s largest hydroelectric dam. The latest GERD discussions held in Washington in February 2020, at which Ethiopia was absent, led to a declaration that restricted the Ethiopian use of the Nile. Nonetheless, Addis Ababa vowed to continue the construction of the dam to fill its reservoir and move away from a rain-fed agricultural economy. Since Egypt depends on the Nile water reservoirs during periods of drought, it has demanded to extend the filling of the

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\(^{(41)}\) Ardemagni, “Gulf Powers.”  
GERD reservoir to a period of twenty-one years, in opposition to Ethiopia’s demand to take on
the task in six years.\(^{(43)}\)

Since delays in reaching a common goal can fuel political and economic instability in Egypt and
Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia could use its role as an investor in both countries to forge an agreement. A
2015 Declaration of Principles allows Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia to seek third-party mediation
to resolve disagreements over the Nile unless their dispute is referred to the International Court
of Justice. To date, Saudi influence has brought Sudan closer to Ethiopia on the issue of the dam.
Egypt, meanwhile, joined Nile Basin development initiatives through the Arab Organization
for Industrialization (AOI) designed to build energy plants in Eritrea.\(^{(44)}\) Moreover, the GCC
Interconnection Agency (GCCIA) undertook a two-year feasibility assessment to build an electricity
cable between Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia, which could connect via Yemen, Djibouti, or Eritrea, to
allow Addis Ababa to complete the GERD project. As an incentive to encourage Cairo to support
the project, GCCIA has considered extending electricity interconnectors to Egypt.\(^{(45)}\)

An optimal agreement would entail convincing the Egyptians to consider Saudi interests in
GERD in return for Riyadh’s commitment to consolidate its security ties with Cairo. Egypt
depends on Gulf assistance to maintain domestic stability and counterterrorism operations in
the Sinai. Furthermore, Saudi support to Egypt is critical in allowing the latter to maintain
balanced political relations with other major players in the Red Sea. Finally, if Egypt is able
to adjust its stance on the dam, as a major investor in Sudan’s agricultural lands, the Kingdom
could facilitate Egyptian access to Sudanese food sources and Red Sea ports.

There are harsh realities to reaching an agreement over dam projects worldwide. The GERD
could displace people, lead to environmental degradation, and be delayed by drought. It
could also expand the Gulf acquisition of rich agricultural lands across the Horn region and
overshadow Egypt’s traditional role as a major African power. In this regard, Saudi Arabia’s

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financial capacities, especially if they are expanded through joint ventures with the Horn and focused to ensure the success of Vision 2030, could complement Egypt’s active role in the Africa Research in Sustainable Intensification for the Next Generation (Africa RISING) projects designed to trigger growth in the continent with active engagement in Ethiopia and East Africa. Furthermore, in 2017, Saudi Arabia succeeded in talks with Egypt to transfer the Red Sea islands of Tiran and Sanafir to the Kingdom in order to expand Vision 2030’s futuristic Neom cross-border city project and the Amaala mega–tourism project. The projects are expected to generate additional economic opportunities in the Red Sea for Egyptian investors.

**Red Sea Security Initiatives**

Transforming the military economies of Eritrea and Ethiopia into peacetime economies calls for tenacity and resolve, but this could be a starting point for creating greater stability and human security in the Horn of Africa. The Jeddah Peace Pact encourages partnerships with Eritrea and Ethiopia to promote security in the Horn and the Red Sea, along with the adoption of collective policies to fight piracy and human trafficking. The measures are designed to transform the Red Sea coast into a magnet for migrants, including the large Eritrean and Ethiopian diasporas living in the Kingdom, who could help build the region’s future. Furthermore, they will enable the presence of an Egyptian outpost naval hub, which is intended to expand regional security.\(^{(46)}\)

Unlike external actors with stakes in the Red Sea, such as Turkey, Qatar, Iran, China, and Russia, Saudi Arabia is a local stakeholder in the region. As a result, the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman support the Kingdom’s drive to build and develop cohesive Gulf–Red Sea initiatives. This includes supporting central governments and state institutions and negotiating with a host of state and substate actors in the Horn. Saudi Arabia has taken steps to mitigate the risk of inadvertently multiplying the number of Horn actors pursuing narrow demands. As a large state, which does not need to diversify its alliances with a host of stakeholders in the Horn, Saudi Arabia (unlike the smaller Gulf states) is also less driven by incentives for immediate economic

profitability and more driven by the need to preserve security in the Horn. To this end, the pact facilitates the building of new security and military coalitions in the Gulf and Horn regions to ensure safer navigation in the Red Sea and contain the Iranian influence. Furthermore, in April 2019, the IGAD Committee of Ambassadors Task Force on the Red Sea brought attention to the need for Gulf-Horn actors to investigate Red Sea rivalries and resolve them, which are measures that the UN and AU support. (47)

The Kingdom’s diplomacy in the Red Sea is not without risks, one of which is increased militarization, given the nature of entrenched conflicts in the Horn region. Generally, the Kingdom offers targeted solutions to resolve these entrenched conflicts in a manner that reshapes the dynamics of Gulf-Horn ties to meet mutual security interests. Drawing on tested UAE experiences in the Horn, which have involved the splintering of local groups in places like Somalia and led to commercial disputes with Djibouti, Saudi Arabia has aimed to support the UAE in offering projects that better complement and build the capacities of the local Horn states and the Somali semiautonomous regions. In the future, Saudi initiatives could complement UAE measures, to include building up local military and commercial capacities in the Horn, training national and local police forces and coast guards, and expand military-commercial networks in Red Sea ports, while also helping to mediate potential disputes between the UAE and local Horn actors.

Saudi facilitation efforts helped Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia issue a joint declaration for cooperation in 2018. (48) In 2019, the Kingdom supported Sudan’s power transition after President Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir was deposed by accommodating demands by the AU to focus on building up Sudan’s governance and democratic institutions under a Transitional Military Council that would share power with a civilian government. (49) The Kingdom encouraged dialog among rival Somali groups, backed US-led efforts to resolve tensions between the UAE and Mogadishu in 2018, forged agreements with the UAE to stabilize South Yemen and use its


ports in 2019, encouraged Eritrea to host a thirty-year GCC military base in its ports, mediated the reduction of UAE forces in Socotra, resolved Djibouti’s 2006 dispute over a concession it offered the UAE in the Doraleh Port, and retained military bases in Djibouti since 2016, after resolving tensions between Djibouti and the UAE over leasing terms for Gulf military bases a year earlier.\(^{(50)}\) In 2015, Saudi Arabia negotiated with Sudan, Djibouti, and Eritrea to reduce Iran’s presence in the Horn, and when Asmara severed ties with Tehran in 2016, the UAE offered additional financial assistance to Eritrea.\(^{(51)}\) Finally, in February 2019, with Saudi encouragement, Ethiopia settled its differences with the ONLF and accepted a peace deal with its rebel neighbors in the Somali region.\(^{(52)}\)

Still, Saudi Arabia must build collective regional policies that ensure the success of the pact. As a relatively isolated state, Eritrea is skeptical about the effectiveness of collective security initiatives that Egypt and Saudi Arabia have explored, including discussions to create a Red Sea Forum for Coastal States since 2017. Additionally, Asmara is concerned that collective regional policies could give Ethiopia a prominent role in the Red Sea. As a result, Eritrea’s shift toward peace must be driven by President Afwerki’s desire to build Red Sea alliances with Saudi Arabia. In April 2019, Riyadh held a meeting to encourage discussions between Eritrea and Ethiopia over the Red Sea, in which the Eritrean president did not participate, citing differences with Addis Ababa and insisting on an alliance between Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Red Sea. Presidential advisor to the Eritrean president Yeman Gebreab attended the meeting but expressed concern over the buildup of new organizational institutions.\(^{(53)}\) Nonetheless, the Kingdom has encouraged Asmara to enhance its relations with the other Horn countries, given the latter’s traditional loyalty-based foreign policy behavior. While loyalties can shift, Asmara-Riyadh ties have allowed the Kingdom to improve Eritrea’s relations with Sudan after the latter closed its borders to Eritrea in 2018.\(^{(54)}\)

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\(^{(51)}\) “Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa’s Horn: Lessening the Impact.”


In December 2018, Saudi Arabia launched the Red Sea Security Council initiative for the Arab and African countries. Egypt, Jordan, Eritrea, Yemen, Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia are members of this new strategic bloc, which represents the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden waterways, considered two of the world’s busiest waterways connecting Asia to Europe, through over USD 750 billion in annual trade. In January 2020, the European Union and the United States welcomed the charter for the council as an important step to secure global navigation. (55) Talks to consolidate the Red Sea Forum progressed in 2019, and at least four meetings were held to address the subject. (56) The forum will identify emerging threats and build solutions to address them, based on better governance and security cooperation among the Red Sea coastal states. However, Egypt’s desire to limit membership in the forum to coastal states could dampen Ethiopia’s support for this new bloc. (57) Still, Ethiopia has welcomed initiatives that embrace multilateral African-Gulf approaches to restoring peace. (58) It is also restructuring its National Defense Forces (ENDF) to allow for improved integration into region-wide security and defense plans. (59)

Spoilers that could compromise a strong Gulf-Horn–Red Sea alliance include interstate Gulf rivalries, the extension of Gulf crises to the Horn, interstate rivalries in the Horn, and Egypt’s security concerns and leadership drive in the Horn. In 2017, Somalia declined to sever its ties with Qatar, although Puntland, Galmidug and Hirshabelle supported the quartet. As a result of these divides, there are only modest signs of progress in talks between rival Somali groups. Unlike Saudi Arabia, which insists on building an institutional framework for cooperation in the Red Sea, Egypt has generally preferred flexible mechanisms for thematic cooperation in the region. (60) The approach could allow Egypt to remain a major player in Africa, but in the long haul it will hinder regional multilateralism.

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(55) “Arab and African Countries Establish New Entity to Safeguard the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.”
(59) Allo, “The Abiy Doctrine.”
Finally, the war in Yemen could increase the cost of maintaining Red Sea alliances and increase threats by nonstate extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Stability in the Horn requires that peace be restored in Yemen, a country from which over 350,000 people fled the conflict to seek refuge, mainly in the Horn region. As a result, the Saudi-led military coalition fighting the war in Yemen carried out joint military drills in the Red Sea in 2018, enlisted the help of the Horn countries to preserve security, and in exchange infused the Horn economies with needed cash to prevent breakdowns of the regimes there.

Promising regional trends suggest that the Red Sea Security Council could consolidate the peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The council plans to revive IGAD’s drive for reforms and restructuring and serve as a platform to facilitate dialog in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. In April 2019, IGAD established a task force to facilitate the integration of security and economic goals across the two waterways. The United Nations simultaneously encouraged the holding of regional forums to help the Horn and Gulf regions to consolidate the peace. Several new GCC agreements and joint plans of action made with nations in the Horn aim to build broad-based political and security dialogs to counter terrorism and extremism and to increase interagency cooperation between regional organizations including the GCC, the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the AU. The measures will encourage Egyptian and Eritrean commitment to IGAD, which has been lacking to date. As a result, the AU has identified Gulf actors as major pillars for peace in the Horn and the Red Sea.

(61) Ibid., 14–20.
Conclusion

Prosperity in the Red Sea is a requirement for building a regional order that is inclusive of Eritrea and Ethiopia. The Kingdom will be called on to shoulder the main cost of building sustainable coalitions in the Red Sea. Its Vision 2030 plan could lead to Gulf investments that promote peace in the Horn, and consolidate Red Sea partnerships, but it remains to be seen whether the rapid Saudi and GCC foreign investments in the two Horn countries will keep Eritrea and Ethiopia committed to peace.

Extreme poverty and debt in the two Horn nations increase the risk of investments and cause trust to deteriorate. There is also the added risk that attempts to build strong security alliances across the Red Sea will fail to slow the militarization of the region as a result of its entrenched conflicts. Future conflicts in the Red Sea will stretch the limited economic resources of Eritrea and Ethiopia alike.

Despite these concerns, Saudi Arabia’s role is central in the effort to ensure that Eritrea and Ethiopia remain committed to peace. In the absence of other international efforts that are sufficiently powerful and effective to ensure the peace between the two Horn countries, the Jeddah Peace Pact could be the only viable option for building stronger alliances between Addis Ababa and Asmara. Furthermore, there is no country other than Saudi Arabia that is located close to the two Horn countries and has the interest and resources to prevent the resurfacing of potentially destabilizing rivalries between Addis Ababa and Asmara. This is part of the rationale that has driven Saudi Arabia to secure the pact and to offer economic, security and financial incentives to keep the peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia, despite the seemingly transactional nature of the enterprise.
King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS)

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