

A novel reading of geopolitical rivalries in Horn of Africa

Somaliland as maritime geopolitical fulcrum of the region



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OPINION

The state of Somalia, located in the Horn of Africa, has, from the 1990s to the present day, experienced successive waves of instability and internal conflict. Over the past decade, concurrent with the commencement of the military assault by the Arab Coalition Forces led by Saudi Arabia against the Yemeni Ansarullah (Houthis), the strategic role and standing of the Horn of Africa region increased, and, more than ever before, positioned this region as a focal point of attention for regional and international actors.

At the regional level, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Israel are regarded as key actors in the Horn of Africa, and, at the international level, China views this region as one of the crucial maritime transit corridors within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. The political conduct of the United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa region is characterized by a particular degree of flexibility, and, to a considerable extent, the interests of Abu Dhabi overlap with the interests and objectives of Beijing and Tel Aviv. In the geo-economic dimension, through its dominance and influence over Yemen's strategic ports and the islands overlooking the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the United Arab Emirates has transformed itself into China's gateway of entry into the Horn of Africa region. However, in the geopolitical dimension, Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv's shared rivalry and antagonism with Turkey and the Yemeni Houthis created the conditions for undertaking a joint action in the Somaliland region.

New chapter in macro-geopolitical conflicts

The recognition of the Somaliland region as an independent country by Israel provoked significant controversy in the Arab world and sparked numerous reactions. However, irrespective of these reactions and controversies, this recognition will expand Israel's latitude for more extensive agency in the strategic Horn of Africa region.

This development will provide the groundwork for Israeli penetration into southern Yemen, particularly in the Bab el-Mandeb area. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, alongside the Suez Canal, constitutes one of the most vital arteries of maritime transit. Approximately 12% of global trade and 30% of cargo vessels traverse this passageway. Any disruption along this route exerts a direct impact upon energy markets and supply chains across the globe.

After the developments following October 7, 2023, the strategic Bab el-Mandeb waterway transformed into an insecure zone for maritime transit, and, simultaneously, regional actors each endeavored to dominate this strategic waterway in order to control, through it, a substantial portion of global maritime trade flows that reach Europe via the Suez Canal.

The Port of Berbera, in the Somaliland region, is regarded as a strategic fulcrum in maritime transit between the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal. The Somaliland region, from 1991, has been administered autonomously and maintained its diplomatic relations with regional and global powers independently from the central government. The proximity of the Port of Berbera to the Gulf of Aden transformed this port, after the Yemeni war, into one of the strategic nodes



A man stands in front of the Hargeisa War Memorial monument in Hargeisa, the capital of the self-declared Republic of Somaliland, on November 7, 2024.

● LUIS TATO/AFP

of maritime transit.

In 2017, the United Arab Emirates, through the DP World Company, assumed the administration of this strategic port located in the Somaliland region. This port constitutes a counterbalancing point vis-à-vis the Port of Djibouti, which represents another arena of competition among global actors.

Abu Dhabi's investment in the Somaliland region and the development of port infrastructure in this area function as a deterrent response to the expansion of Saudi influence in Djibouti and the efforts of Qatar and Turkey to invest in Somali ports. Beyond the geo-economic dimension, the growing influence of the United Arab Emirates in Somaliland, which reached its apogee during the Yemen war, is primarily attributable to the recognition of the importance of preserving southern Yemen because the prerequisite of geopolitical superiority in Yemen is domination over ports proximate to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. In other words, Yemen and the Horn of Africa region are, from a geopolitical perspective, neither detached nor distinct from one another. This condition enables Abu Dhabi to exert control over a constellation of strategic ports extending from the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to the Suez Canal.



The coast of Berbera, Somaliland

● HAMZA SULUB/SHUTTERSTOCK

Israel, old-new actor in the Horn of Africa

The presence and influence of Israel in the Horn of Africa region dates back to the early 1990s. Ethiopia and Eritrea were among the first countries that, during this period, initiated diplomatic relations with Israel. The expansion of Israel's diplomatic relations with these two states, particularly Ethiopia, afforded Tel Aviv the capacity to engage in balancing behavior against Egypt. After the introduction of the Abraham

Accords initiative and the pioneering role of the United Arab Emirates in normalization policies, traditional rivalries and the perception of shared threats created the conditions for attaining mutual understanding and the convergence of interests in the Horn of Africa. Over the past decade, the United Arab Emirates engaged in costly rivalries with its traditional competitors, from Yemen to Libya and Sudan.

Abu Dhabi, given its geopolitical weight and standing, cannot operate beyond its political resources and capacities against its rivals, particularly within an arena of competition and conflict that extends from Yemen to the Mediterranean coasts and the Horn of Africa region. Emirati political elites, aware of this vulnerability in their foreign policy, are endeavoring, by aligning with actors whose interests overlap more extensively with their own, to augment their geopolitical influence and, concurrently, to expand the scope of deterrence against their rivals.

At the initial stage, the primary priority of the United Arab Emirates is alteration in Yemen's geopolitical status. Alongside Abu Dhabi, Iran and Saudi Arabia, as two other traditional actors, possess influence in Yemen. The United Arab Emirates, while avoiding direct confrontation and tension with these two actors, seeks,

through alignment with Israeli policies in the Horn of Africa region, to recalibrate the strategic game in its own favor. The Yemeni Southern Transitional Council (STC), which advocates the independence of southern Yemen, is regarded as one of the key allies of the United Arab Emirates in Yemen, and currently exercises control over a substantial portion of southern territories. The STC, through Abu Dhabi's diplomatic channels, engaged in dialogues with Israeli officials, the substance of which entails the rec-

ognition of South Yemen in exchange for normalization with Israel.

Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates demonstrates little inclination toward opening a war front against the Houthis because such an action would lead to the intensification of tensions with Iran, on the one hand, and the expansion of Saudi influence in Yemen, on the other. Abu Dhabi interprets Israel's recognition of the Somaliland region as a step toward intensifying intelligence operations, targeted assassinations, and the destruction of Houthi military infrastructure by Tel Aviv. Moreover, the recognition of an autonomous region in the Horn of Africa could potentially serve as a prelude to the recognition of southern Yemen and eastern Libya as independent states.

Israel's objectives in recognizing the Somaliland region should be categorized into medium-term and long-term goals. In the medium term, the aforementioned region could transform into a launching point for reconnaissance and intelligence operations and, ultimately, aerial strikes against Houthi military targets. The declaration of South Yemen's independence, on the other hand, could broaden Israel's access to the Gulf of Aden.

In the long term, the recognition of autonomous and quasi-independent political entities could become an instrument within Israeli foreign policy, through which, while exercising deterrence against regional rivals, Israel expands the range of its allies and political partners in the region.

The recognition of Somaliland as an independent state is predominantly the product of intertwined geopolitical relations in the region. After October 7, 2023, the scope of tensions between Israel and the Axis of Resistance, centered on Iran, extended from the Levant region to the entirety of the Arab Middle East and the Horn of Africa region. Each side endeavored, through the exploitation of existing geopolitical capacities and resources, to impose irreparable political and economic costs upon the opposing side.

The entry of the Houthis into the theater of conflict, which made Israel's maritime transit insecure, compelled Tel Aviv to challenge Houthi power through the expansion of its influence in the Horn of Africa region. Nevertheless, it must be noted that the Israeli agency in the Horn of Africa is not confined solely to the containment of the Houthis, and other geopolitical objectives also underlie these decisions.

Concurrently, the United Arab Emirates regards the expansion of Israeli influence in Somaliland as a major development from several perspectives, which aligns with Abu Dhabi's interests in this region. The recognition of Somaliland as an independent country is considered a significant blow to Somalia's central government, a government that is perceived as one of Turkey's and Qatar's key allies in the Horn of Africa.

The alignment of Yemen's Southern Transitional Council with Israel, and the bilateral dialogues conducted between them with the mediation of the United Arab Emirates, could lead to the repetition of the Somaliland scenario, this time in southern Yemen, which would entail Israeli influence over the Gulf of Aden and the containment of Abu Dhabi's rivals in Yemen.

The selection of this temporal juncture for recognizing the Somaliland region as an independent political entity is not accidental, but rather constitutes a prelude to major and consequential geopolitical transformations in the region.

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In the geopolitical dimension, Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv's shared rivalry and antagonism with Turkey and the Yemeni Ansarullah (Houthis) created the conditions for undertaking a joint action in the Somaliland region. Abu Dhabi's investment in the Somaliland region and the development of port infrastructure in this area function as a deterrent response to the expansion of Saudi influence in Djibouti and the efforts of Qatar and Turkey to invest in Somali ports.