
THE HORN OF AFRICA

ITS STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE FOR EUROPE, THE GULF STATES, AND BEYOND

Alexander Rondos

SO VARIED is the Horn of Africa that people pluck what they wish from that variety to generalize. It is that diversity of geography, history, population, politics, and culture that has made the region so prone to conflict within its societies and between its countries. And it is those differences that have allowed outsiders to play proxy politics with the region.

The Horn is also a region that has been at an historical crossroads. Traders have travelled through the region, north to south and west to east. Empires have grown and subsided. Islam and Christianity embedded themselves in the region from the earliest days of each faith. The river Nile rises in the region and flows through to Egypt, linking all the countries in a mortal association for survival. Along its eastern coast, it gives on to the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean, its people engaged in trade for millennia, linking themselves to the Gulf and beyond.

But there is one overriding truth about the Horn of Africa. It straddles a geographical space of such strategic importance that those who treat it with indifference will one day pay a price for their neglect, whilst those who try to manipulate it will get their fingers burnt. As I write, the core of this region, comprising the countries of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Somalia—with Kenya and Uganda very closely associated—has attracted once again in its history the attention of greater powers.

Terrorism has intensified the presence of the international community. The confrontation within the Muslim world has led to a realignment of loyalties in the region. The conflict in Yemen has raised concerns about the security of trade through the Red Sea. The jugular vein of trade between East and West is less protected than ever. The pervasive spread of a more purist interpretation of Islam in the region has shaken as-

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Map: European Union

The Horn of Africa

assumptions about cohabitation among communities throughout the Horn. The global migration crisis has galvanized a European Union concerned both by terrorism and migration into a far greater diplomatic, economic, and security activism in this critical part of Africa.

In geopolitical terms, the Horn is the fragile neighborhood of Europe's very fractured southern neighborhood. It is also the backyard of countries in the Muslim world. Confronted by their own conflicts, the latter have decided to secure their own interests in the Horn of Africa and are actively doing so. Whether the Western interest in

counter terrorism, good governance, and economic growth can find common ground with the security concerns of the Gulf so as to sustain a momentum towards stability and coherence—rather than fracture in the Horn—is one of the great challenges that we collectively face and must meet.

The people of the Horn of Africa and their governments will have to steer a delicate path to spare themselves and the region from the vagaries of strategic clientelism; those from outside will do well to understand the region—its history and politics—lest they think that this part of Africa is an easy proxy.

THREE CHALLENGES

Three major challenges confront the region. The first is how states manage to win over the population to a national project—therein lies the vital distinction between persuasion and coercion. The former requires deliberation that will one day, perhaps, become a form of democracy. If they don't, marginalization in urban and rural areas will prevail. Discontent creates new loyalties that are easily exploited from within or by external actors.

The second challenge concerns the task of regional integration. This is a region of loosely controlled frontiers often populated by marginalized communities that straddle boundaries and become proxies in the politics between countries of the region. There is, therefore, a link between internal politics and regional integration.

Finally, the Horn of Africa has been an easy playground for players outside the region and outside Africa. The mix of poor governance, mutual destabilization, and external intervention are the combustible ingredients of a region always hovering on the edges of insecurity. It is this mix that the region is challenged to overturn into a virtuous cycle of participatory government, regional

integration that focuses on building a regional economic market, and thus a region that can negotiate on its behalf with the outside world rather than retail its interest to the first buyer.

To overcome these challenges is not easy. The Horn of Africa is freighted with divisive historical baggage. How do we make sense, then, of this region? It shares no common colonial past. Italy, France, and Britain each left a now increasingly distant imprint. Three of the region's countries—Sudan, Somalia, and South Sudan—have succumbed to most vicious and still unresolved civil wars.

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The countries have simply fragmented—whatever the protestations to the contrary of their rump central authorities. The Horn is also the only part of Africa where, in the cases of Eritrea and South Sudan, secession has been recognized. No other part of the world has more peacekeepers (or enforcers)—whether they are hatted by the United Nations or the African Union. Few parts of the world have generated, and yet host, more refugees.

At its center lies Ethiopia, never colonized, the successor to an empire comprising a wide diversity of populations,

now bound together by a form of ethnic federalism which will hold so long as economic growth and redistribution outstrip the expectations of its youth. Populations from each of its neighbors inhabit the periphery of Ethiopia.

To its east lies Somalia, the only nation after independence to espouse an irredentist ideology. Shattered by civil conflict but united in identity, the test for Somalia, its neighbors, and the international community will be to help weave a newly constituted state out of the tattered garment that has been Somalia.

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To the west lies Sudan, divided between its central authorities and rebellious peripheries, a power that espoused sharia, was willing to shed its southern territory, sustain a conflict in the Blue Nile, Kordofan, and Darfur, and still survive for almost 30 years. Finally, to the north lies Eritrea, isolated by its conflicts with Ethiopia and Djibouti, subject to international sanctions, controlling almost one thousand kilometers of the Red Sea coastline, and accused by many of gross human rights violations.

These countries form the core of the Horn of Africa, and each faces challenges to create a lasting sense of

national identity; the failure to do so reverberates through the region. Where and when this project collapses, there is conflict within and the provocation of conflict among neighbors. Five wars have dominated this region in the last 40 years, and they have all sucked in other neighbors. In the Horn of Africa,

the failure of one state to manage itself is like a bullet that ricochets through the region.

REVERBERATIONS

The earliest war was between Somalia and Ethiopia in the 1980s. It drained the resources of both regimes, and led to their collapse.

Somalia fragmented into a twenty-year civil conflict that has brought with it the emergence of Al-Shabaab and thus the intervention of its neighbors Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti under the aegis of the African Union. The Dergue in Ethiopia succumbed to the combined assault of the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front and Eritrean People's Liberation Front—an uneasy alliance of rebels that, after the independence of Eritrea, resulted in war in 2001 between it and Ethiopia. Sudan has been at war with itself since soon after independence, resulting in the secession and independence of South Sudan and a continuing civil war to the south (in the Two Areas and the west in Darfur). The euphoria

of South Sudan's independence was replaced by a bitter political fight that has now shattered the world's youngest UN member state, provoked unimaginable human rights violations, and created serious tension among neighboring states.

Trying to hold together the fragile unity of the region has been the primary goal of Ethiopia. Since the current government came to power in 1992, it has been the driving force behind the diplomatic efforts—exercised within the framework of the eight-country Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD)—to maintain an open line among countries, whatever their differences, and prevent a breakdown of relations within the region.

IGAD has been engaged in reconciling clans within Somalia and was the forum for the agreement on South Sudan signed in August 2015. Ethiopia has frontiers with every member of IGAD (with the exception of Uganda) and is therefore magnetically drawn to a strategy that maintains the peace on its frontiers. In this role of stabilizer, the government in Addis Ababa has demonstrated that it is the only actor with the capacity to project itself throughout the region and, as such, has enjoyed support for this role from the international community. The loose end in the

region is Eritrea, which has found itself excluded from IGAD and until recently isolated from the international community and under sanctions.

But the context within which IGAD operates is changing. Three factors have emerged and they are inter-related. First, the conflicts of the Middle East, spreading through North Africa, have provoked a wave of migration towards Europe; second, an expansion of terrorist operations in the belt from the Sahel to Somalia; and third, an intensified engagement of countries of the Gulf in the Horn of Africa.

The European Union is now engaging to control the flow of migrants. The international community is reviewing with whom it must collaborate to contain and defeat Daesh. The coalition led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is taking unprecedented steps to engage countries in the Horn of Africa. The latter is the most decisive new element in the strategic balances of the Horn of Africa.

THE ARAB SPRING'S IMPACT

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have dramatically altered the landscape within which the Horn of Africa must view its role in the world, and it has shaken some assumptions about relations among the countries of the region.

These developments have also obliged Western policymakers to reassess carefully their own assumptions in the region. A pattern of strategic realignments by countries in the Horn with players in the Gulf is affecting their domestic politics, disturbing relations among them, and creating entirely new challenges for the Horn of Africa—and by extension in the Red Sea region.

These developments began with the ouster of President Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, intensified with the outbreak of the conflict in Yemen, and been subsequently shaped by the Saudi-led strategy to secure for their alliance the participation or non-interference of the countries of the Horn. KSA and other Gulf states have developed specific new relationships with Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea. This has generated a reaction in countries like Ethiopia and Kenya, which see behind this new tilt towards the Gulf a loss of their relative influence as well as a growing threat of Wahhabi-driven radicalization in the region.

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The acceleration of Gulf engagement has been mounting since early 2015. Sudan—once isolated and even shunned by key partners in the Gulf—has restored relations with KSA, removed the Iranian presence from its territory and enjoys financial support from UAE and KSA.

UAE has rented the port of Assab for an unknown amount—a financial lifeline for the regime of President Isaias that lifts Eritrea out of financial and political isolation. In addition to UAE involvement in Somalia, KSA has now promised \$50 million (of which \$20 million have been disbursed), in return for Somalia breaking relations with Iran. The conflict in Yemen now has Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula operating in full control of ports that trade directly with Somaliland and Puntland. Somalia, Sudan, and Eritrea are reported to have sent troops to Yemen. The GCC is developing its own Horn of Africa strategy. KSA has made it clear that it regards the Horn—notably Egypt, Sudan, and Somalia—as its “security belt.”

Meanwhile, the spread of Wahhabi-influenced radicalization in the Horn continues unabated. By radicalization I mean the emerging pres-

ence of an exclusivist version of Islam in a region of Africa that has historically enjoyed a high degree of cohabitation among faiths. Along the coast of East Africa—in Somalia, in parts of Ethiopia and possibly Eritrea, and in Sudan—the influence of imported radicalism now seems to be prevalent.

Governments in the region are perplexed. This is both a consequence of marginalization in many communities, and of an effective proselytism. And while piety is the prerogative of any individual, this particular brand of piety has significant implications when it assumes communal dimensions in a region where the traditional Sufi practice of Islam has allowed for a high degree of coexistence with other faiths.

The effect of these shifts has been to lift the isolation of Sudan and Eritrea. The assumption that isolation would lead both governments to change their internal policies may now need to be reviewed by those who champion it. It still holds that Sudan needs to find some way to end its civil war and that Eritrea should create the domestic incentives so that the country's youth choose to stay home rather than emigrate. But the dynamics are significantly altered.

Likewise, the Somali government may be tempted to use additional financial resources received from the Gulf to strengthen its political position in an election year rather than invest in security and service delivery. Ethiopia will want to be assured that engagement by the Gulf countries with Eritrea will lead to a transformation of policy within Eritrea.

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All the countries of the region are reviewing how they handle the issue of radicalization and are seeking additional ways to prevent traditional political competition from slipping into sectarian conflict. Western countries—which are by far

the largest donors in the region and are seeking a model of better democratic governance as the path to great economic benefit for the region—must now engage with new actors to assess whether their strategic objectives are the same, or at least compatible.

A MORE STRUCTURED CONVERSATION

I have suggested at the outset that there are three key objectives for the region: create participatory politics that respects pluralism, build a real regional integration based on economic incentives and security cooperation, and manage the tempta-

tion of external interference. To achieve this will require the region's traditional Western partners to assess whether their goals and methods are appropriate, and for those who are engaging more actively now in the region to understand how complicated is the local context. A more structured conversation among all these parties is needed.

The absence of citizens participating in a way that they feel their fate is not in someone else's hands is the first challenge. This has four components. How we define democracy, how youth is engaged in politics, how one rebuilds countries after conflict, and how one redistributes the proceeds of the abundant natural resources of the region are the immediate tasks.

One central theme courses through the domestic politics of each country in the region. It is whether the national project—if they have one—can sustain itself and whether it commands the loyalty of all citizens. This is a vital issue for Africa, where the consolidation of post-colonial independence remains unfinished business. Corruption, cronyism, and social exclusion will eventually haunt the perpetrators—not because the world outside will act on it in some

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Worse, others beyond the region will find local collaborators to exploit the region, its discontents, and its resources. Arms merchants, human traffickers, and ideological carpetbaggers already abound in the region. But anyone who has the privilege of witnessing the dynamism and imagination of the youth of Africa—the majority of the continent by far—can only be astonished at its potential. And the leaders who do not acknowledge this are fatally tempting the Gods of Youth.

We have to review what we mean by democracy. Electoral turnout is relatively easy to achieve. But that

is not democracy. We need to assess whether politics in whatever form invites the participation of all, and, in societies as diverse as those found in the Horn Africa, whether a functioning acknowledgement of pluralism exists.

What we see in the region is that populations are moving to urban centers, where aspirations are not being met by opportunity. These are the urban sprawls that become tomorrow's megacities. We

are seeing the capacity or willingness of the state to deliver services as being limited at best in wide swathes of territory beyond the urban centers. To refer to these as ungoverned spaces is, however, a misnomer. Someone is always in charge, whether it is organized crime, a religious protection racket like Al-Shabaab, or some local coalition of ethnic and business interests trying to survive.

It is axiomatic that when local populations do not feel the presence of a state delivering services, they will revert to another provider and protector. This creates a dual marginalization that is both urban and rural. In some cases, the state does not have the capacity; in others, the state seems to willfully neglect. The end result is that the state in question has effectively retreated from its assumed role of being a provider of last resort. In that vacuum new loyalties are created and those with sectarian or other ideological agendas find easy recruits. And thus the process of fragmentation of loyalty becomes a fragmentation of government.

It is for this reason that one appeals for better governance. This is the test for the future and everyone—governments, citizens, and international actors—must join to focus in supporting the practice of participation in politics.

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The facile conclusion that this region is irredeemably insecure and therefore to be interfered with by global opportunists or the legions of micro-managing Western consultants is wrong. There is an autonomy to the politics and diplomacy of the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia, since 1991, has been the driving force behind efforts to build regional cooperation using IGAD as the framework. The bland name of this regional organization belies the diplomatic activism within the region to contain the impact of these conflicts.

IGAD is heavily engaged in Somalia, as it has been in negotiating a peace agreement in South Sudan. Neither is easy because the

current governing authorities would prefer to minimize or control the role of neighbors in their affairs. How IGAD can build on its current efforts to create a momentum around cooperation for security and growth is the key challenge, because the interests of the region are now being influenced by the wider neighborhood in which it is situated.

ECONOMIC RESOURCES

The Horn of Africa is blessed with abundant natural and human resources but with insufficient infrastructure to produce and distribute.

Hydropower and hydrocarbons are to the Horn of Africa what “coal and steel” were once to the integration of a war-ravaged Europe.

Ethiopia’s highlands potentially contain a hydropower base that can provide electricity for the entire region and beyond. Oil and gas, despite the current doldrums of the industry, are to be found in almost all countries. Manufacturing is only in its infancy.

It is also remarkable that from Massawa in Eritrea to Mombasa in Kenya, the entire coastline can only boast of one sizeable port: Djibouti. This is economic and strategic nonsense for a market of some 300 million inhabitants. The World Bank and the United Nations have offered to address these issues.

No investor, however, will provide sustained capital in this region—whatever its longterm potential—so long as the current round of disputes remains unresolved. The longer they remain unresolved, the greater the temptation for local actors to seek external patronage.

We are in the midst of a race against time. Every day that Somalia’s progress towards its own

recovery is delayed means less opportunity for each Somali and more instability for the region. South Sudan’s long and still lethal journey to efficient and uncorrupted statehood will require an entirely new commitment from its own leadership as well as the sustained commitment of its neighbors. Sudan’s differences with South Sudan must be settled to allow for peaceful commerce between the two countries. And Sudan will never

be able to benefit from strategic investment and an end of its financial isolation so long as it perpetuates its internal wars.

THE SECURITY DIMENSION

Strategically, the coastal belt comprising Eritrea, Djibouti, Somaliland, and Somalia must become a secure coastline—one that guarantees the safety of trade from the Indian Ocean through to the Mediterranean. For this to be achieved, Ethiopia and Eritrea will need to resolve their differences; until this occurs, a strategic paralysis will prevail over the region.

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Yemen will have to be resolved because it has infected the security of the Horn and the Red Sea. An end to Somalia's terrorism will require continued and coordinated investment by both Western and Gulf partners. Likewise, to the west, the current differences over the use of the Nile waters will require boldness and imagination to allow Egypt to be assured of a steady water supply as it improves its own water management, whilst ensuring that the upstream countries have what they need for their own development.

Confronted by such a mind-boggling array of challenges, it is tempting to succumb to retail conflict resolution and short-term economic and political interventions, instead of focusing on the strategic imperative to orchestrate a wholesale approach that broadens the incentives and participants and creates an entirely new dynamic of constructive engagement within the region and by key members of the international community. The crises in Syria, Iraq, and Libya have so absorbed the international community that we are in danger of failing another strategic region because we are distracted.

HONEST DISCUSSION

The final challenge then is for the international community to agree that there is a real danger of neglecting

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this region, that stakeholders must cooperate rather than compete in this region, and that an approach must be advanced that incorporates security, political, and economic solutions. The time has come for an honest and creative discussion amongst those concerned with economic growth and security of the wider Red Sea area—the Horn, the GCC countries, Egypt, the European

Union, the United States, and China.

The challenges of economic growth, political pluralism and participation, security of trade, the fight against radicalization and terrorism, and regional economic integration all need to be converted into a joint effort that will allow for the integration of the Horn of Africa into a platform of security and economic cooperation. The costly and wasteful transaction costs of ad hoc intervention to resolve conflicts or to secure particular investments can be transformed into a wider pact that allows the region to grow in peace, integrate, and protect itself from the depredations of competing and corrupting foreign interests. ●

