

The Saudi-Emirati Rift: Ethiopia as the Silent Extension of a Struggle for Influence



The Saudi-Emirati rift is no longer confined to tactical disagreements within temporary alliances that have begun to surface openly on the Yemeni front in recent weeks. Instead, it has evolved into a deeper regional confrontation over influence one that, in recent years, has taken on a strategic dimension tied to the redrawing of power maps across the Middle East and the Horn of Africa.

One of the most prominent arenas of this confrontation has not been the Gulf itself, nor Yemen alone, but Ethiopia a country that may appear geographically distant from the Gulf's decision-making centers, yet has emerged, by virtue of its demographic and military weight, as a pivotal swing state.

Each power seeks to entrench a foothold there that would guarantee dominance over global trade corridors and the balance of power in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa.

From Yemen's battlefields to Ethiopia's highlands

The two Gulf states, which after 2015 appeared as closely aligned poles across multiple files from Yemen to countering Iranian influence have, over time, found themselves facing diverging interests, contrasting tools of influence, and differing

positions on the future of the war and the distribution of political and military power, in addition to growing economic and strategic competition.

This rift did not remain contained within Yemen. Over time, it extended to the opposite shore of the Red Sea, as competition between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi ceased to revolve around a Yemeni city or faction, and instead focused on who controls the keys to a logistical network stretching from the Gulf to East Africa. Ethiopia thus emerged as a more complex new arena for the expansion of influence.

As the gateway to the Horn of Africa, whoever wields influence there gains vital access and indirect leverage over Red Sea navigation. Addis Ababa also serves as a connective hub between the Gulf and the Horn, offering airspace that can be used logistically to support regional operations.

Despite being landlocked, Ethiopia depends critically on maritime outlets beyond its borders, as well as on its airspace, which constitutes a central artery for international connectivity. This makes it acutely sensitive to any regional arrangements affecting Red Sea traffic or the surrounding security balance.

During periods of tension with neighboring states, access to sea and air routes becomes an almost existential issue, prompting Addis Ababa to forge strategic understandings with external actors to secure logistical stability. It is precisely here that Ethiopia's value emerged as strategic depth for influence networks extending beyond Yemen itself.

This reality has turned Ethiopia into an ideal location for regional powers seeking to build logistical depth that goes beyond transport and trade to the level of geopolitical influence, far from arenas of direct confrontation.

As a result, the dispute surrounding it has become more than a mere misunderstanding; it is a clash of geopolitical projects over who will shape the emerging regional order around the Red Sea.

Thus, competition has shifted from the direct theater of war in Yemen to the arena of strategic positioning in Ethiopia. This geographic shift reflects a transformation in the strategic mindset of the two Gulf neighbors: while Yemen was once a space for securing borders, Ethiopia has become a venue for outlining the contours of a new regional order, as each side seeks to prove its ability to manage complex files beyond its immediate geographic surroundings.

In this sense, Yemen is no longer a self-contained arena but part of a broader conflict system extending into the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia, meanwhile, is not a substitute for Yemen, but rather strategic depth for the same conflict employing quieter, more sustainable tools.

It has thus become part of an influence network linking the Gulf to East Africa, a testing ground for alliance strength and geopolitical maneuvering in the Red Sea, and an indicator of the future balance of power there cementing the Horn of Africa as a new strategic depth for Gulf competition.

Ethiopia: From partnership to the Emirati agenda

After decades of a foreign policy marked by a degree of balance and relative neutrality toward Arab powers, 2018 marked a turning point. With the rise of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the launch of political and economic reforms, Ethiopia's foreign-policy compass shifted dramatically, and its position began to move from that of an independent partner toward closer alignment with the Emirati agenda.

Prior to this shift, Addis Ababa pursued a cautious foreign policy based on diversified partnerships and avoidance of dependence on any single axis. Its relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE were largely formal and conventional, centered on general economic cooperation, development assistance, and traditional diplomatic frameworks without becoming embedded in any specific regional influence network.

Following the domestic changes that accompanied Abiy Ahmed's ascent, Abu Dhabi vaulted to the forefront through its behind-the-scenes role in ending nearly two decades of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This was followed by major investments, economic backing, and extensive financial and military assistance.

The UAE became involved in strategic projects with logistical and security dimensions, linking economic cooperation to a broader web of interests that positioned infrastructure from ports to airspace within a comprehensive geopolitical vision.

This shift was no coincidence, but the outcome of a long-term Emirati strategy that focused on strengthening ties with Abiy Ahmed through high-level visits, direct support, and the construction of a relationship that went beyond traditional diplomacy and development projects toward a comprehensive strategic partnership encompassing economic, security, and political dimensions. This granted Abu Dhabi influence extending beyond economics into the realm of strategic decision-making within its partner state.

Ethiopia, for its part, appears to have found in the Emirati model a pragmatic partner capable of providing rapid military support without heavy bureaucratic constraints. This was evident during the Tigray conflict, when Emirati support for Addis Ababa included drones and advanced military equipment making Ethiopian decision-making often appear aligned with the UAE's agenda in the Horn of Africa.

By contrast, the Saudi role remained more cautious, less embedded in logistical and security structures, and more reliant on traditional diplomatic influence, development assistance, and institutional cooperation without building the same depth of influence networks on the ground.

Over time, this disparity translated into a relative tilt in Addis Ababa's partnerships toward Abu Dhabi, without amounting to an exclusive alliance, full dependency, or a rupture with Riyadh.

Ports and airspace: Tools of the new cold war

In the undeclared struggle for influence between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, confrontation is no longer measured by troop numbers or front lines, but by the ability to construct logistical influence networks through economic and security alliances.

These have become key instruments of strategic leverage, enabling control over the logistical architecture of regional security from the Red Sea to Bab al-Mandab, and from Yemen to the Horn of Africa.

This dynamic has driven Abu Dhabi to establish bases and ports in multiple locations some ostensibly commercial, others pivotal in regional conflicts. The port of Assab in Eritrea, for instance, became a vital logistical hub, with the participation of 400 Eritrean soldiers in support of the UAE. In Mogadishu, Abu Dhabi provided training to Somali forces to confront al-Shabaab.

Within this expansive network of ports, maritime corridors, and airspace, Ethiopia has been transformed into a logistical node linking trade, security, and politics reflecting an open strategic competition while simultaneously tying part of its logistical security to an influence network led by an external power.

In the context of Gulf rivalry, the port of Berbera in Somaliland stands out as a symbol of this new form of influence. What began as a commercial project evolved into a regional pressure card used by the UAE to enhance its maneuverability and presence along global trade routes, support its interests in Yemen, and link them to Ethiopia.

For Addis Ababa, Berbera represents an additional outlet that reduces reliance on a single partner, but also binds part of its logistical security to an external influence network.

For the UAE, the port is part of a broader network stretching along the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. By developing it and involving Ethiopia, Abu Dhabi seeks to create logistical alternatives that weaken historic dependence on Djibouti and constrain Saudi options. Riyadh, for its part, views this as a threat to Red Sea balances and sees the expansion of Emirati influence in such locations as a factor

reshaping the power equilibrium in this sensitive maritime zone.

Influence is not limited to ports the maritime face of power but extends to Ethiopian airspace, which may appear civilian and technical on the surface yet carries deep strategic implications. Ethiopia's logistical connectivity is used as a tool of influence by linking civilian use with military or security needs.

Control over flight routes, transit arrangements, and logistical facilities provides flexibility in transporting equipment, supplies, and personnel, offering strategic depth for regional operations. This was evident in the rerouting of certain Emirati flights to avoid "unfriendly" airspace—namely Saudi and Egyptian—at the height of tensions.

This became more pronounced with reports of repeated movements by a massive Emirati cargo aircraft between military bases in Abu Dhabi, Israel, Bahrain, and Ethiopia, amid strong suspicions of arms transfers, including frequent flights to Ethiopia's Harar Meda base.

The base has reportedly seen increased activity by the Rapid Support Forces militia, accused of widespread crimes and backed by the UAE. The same aircraft was also implicated in violating the Libya arms embargo by transporting military equipment to forces loyal to General Khalifa Haftar, who in turn supports the Rapid Support Forces.

These opaque flights come amid Emirati repositioning following a decline in its influence in Yemen and Somalia, suggesting that the war in Sudan is being fueled from the air through military alliances involving the UAE and Israel, with logistical hubs in Ethiopia and Libya openly challenging international law at the expense of civilian lives and the suffering of millions.

As Ethiopia emerged as a central link in Abu Dhabi's military strategy, the UAE worked to integrate maritime and aerial presence into a unified network of military and intelligence bases granting it high strategic flexibility. Saudi Arabia, by contrast, relied on official civilian frameworks, leaving its influence in this domain less direct.

This divergence has turned airspace into another arena of undeclared competition, amplifying Emirati influence relative to Saudi Arabia's more traditional approach. At the same time, it places Ethiopia before a delicate equation: the deeper the entanglement, the narrower the gap between economic cooperation and indirect involvement in regional conflicts. Should tensions escalate, Addis Ababa may find itself at the heart of a conflict it did not choose.

In a move analysts say goes beyond mere military assistance, reports have surfaced of Emirati military grants to Ethiopia, including Mirage 2000 fighter jets.

Such transfers may signal a calculated expansion of military influence beyond the Arab world, particularly in the Horn of Africa a region Saudi Arabia fears could be militarized outside frameworks of joint coordination.

Saudi Arabia's response strategy: Competition or collision?

Faced with the rapid Emirati expansion across ports and logistical infrastructure, Saudi Arabia finds itself confronting a regional reality being reshaped by tools different from its traditional ones forcing Riyadh to reassess its approach to the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa.

Saudi Arabia has not stood idle. It has begun reviewing its options beyond the Yemeni arena, adopting a strategy centered on expanding regional relations, strengthening institutional cooperation and security coordination, and building parallel axes and broader balances—rather than entering a race to replicate Emirati networks in order to curb Abu Dhabi's influence in the Horn and the Sahel.

The Saudi strategy is moving toward defining red lines for the UAE. Saudi diplomats have stated that the expansion of Emirati influence in the region conflicts with Riyadh's vision of its strategic security belt, prompting the Kingdom to employ political and financial pressure tools to restore balance.

Riyadh has also made a strong entry into North Africa and the Sahel through security and economic agreements, most recently via security coordination with Algeria. Weeks ago, Saudi Interior Minister Abdulaziz bin Saud at the direction of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman paid an unannounced visit to Algeria, with no prior disclosure of its duration or agenda.

Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune held an “expanded session” with him, a format usually reserved for heads of state or government. This came just months after Tebboune issued veiled criticism of the UAE, and Algerian newspapers accused it of “undermining Algerian national security and supporting a separatist movement.”

Saudi Arabia is also seeking to counterbalance Emirati influence through broader networks and new political-military alliances. It is moving to shape a new military partnership with Egypt and Somalia, which recently—apparently with Saudi backing—canceled all agreements signed with the UAE, including security, defense, and economic deals. This came in response to Emirati support for Yemen's Southern Transitional Council, Ethiopia's maritime ambitions, and Israel's recognition of Somaliland.

According to Bloomberg, this alliance emerging amid unprecedented tensions between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi aims to bolster Red Sea security, confront Emirati

ambitions, encircle Emirati influence, and prevent Abu Dhabi from monopolizing decision-making across several regional theaters, while Riyadh seeks to expand its military cooperation in East Africa.

In parallel, Saudi-Egyptian relations are witnessing notable convergence, with their alliance expanding as coordination deepens to curb the UAE's role in conflict hotspots. Cairo has recently enhanced intelligence cooperation with Riyadh, particularly regarding Emirati activities in Yemen, in a move described as aimed at restoring Saudi support and strengthening Egypt's national security.

This followed Egypt's signing last year of a bilateral military cooperation agreement with Mogadishu, as the three states seek to build a new defense that could redraw regional power balances.

Riyadh and Cairo are also exerting pressure on Haftar's forces to end their partnerships with the UAE in supporting the Rapid Support Forces, alongside agreements to place ports such as Doraleh under Egyptian management instead of Emirati control.

Even Eritrea, Chad, Algeria, and Guinea have seen a gradual decline in Emirati presence due to Abu Dhabi's policies and entanglement in regional conflicts, weakening its logistical and military capabilities.

In another effort to offset growing Emirati influence in Ethiopia and the Horn particularly as the UAE shifts from reliance on Eritrea to expanded military cooperation with Ethiopia, Cairo is pushing Riyadh to strengthen its security ties with Asmara. For Egypt, backing Eritrea is directly linked to confronting Ethiopia, especially after the operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which Cairo views as a strategic threat.

These developments coincide with reports of Turkey seeking to join a defense alliance established by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in September 2025, paving the way for a potential trilateral security axis that could alter power balances in the Middle East and beyond, and recalibrate regional security amid rising geopolitical uncertainty and wavering U.S. commitments.

Saudi Arabia appears driven by a desire to reverse the equation by expanding its partnerships more than ever before. Its moves reflect a rapid redrawing of alliance maps in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa amid intensifying competition over influence, maritime security, and regional power balances.

The critical question is whether these maneuvers will remain within the bounds of transient competition among allies, or evolve into a cold strategic collision that reshapes Gulf balances in Africa.

Field indicators particularly in Ethiopia suggest that divergent tools and visions

have created friction zones. When influence networks intersect in sensitive areas such as Bab al-Mandab and the Red Sea, the likelihood of friction increases, even if it does not translate into direct confrontation, as each side seeks control over vital geostrategic zones through proxies or massive economic contracts.

Thus, the Saudi-Emirati rift, now extending far beyond the Gulf, is redefining the rules of the game in the Horn of Africa. While Addis Ababa seeks to leverage this competition to strengthen its negotiating position and economic and military autonomy, it is walking a tightrope risking becoming a party to a struggle for influence larger than its ability to manage, potentially narrowing its decision-making margin and destabilizing its internal balance during times of crisis.

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