



STRENGTHENING REGIONAL & MIDDLE EASTERN STATES' ENGAGEMENT IN SOMALI STABILITY OPTIONS & ENTRY POINTS



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY - NOVEMBER 2021

IMPLEMENTED BY ADAM SMITH INTERNATIONAL

DELIVERING PEACE & STABILITY IN SOMALIA



'IF PEOPLE COME TOGETHER
THEY CAN EVEN MEND A
CRACK IN THE SKY'

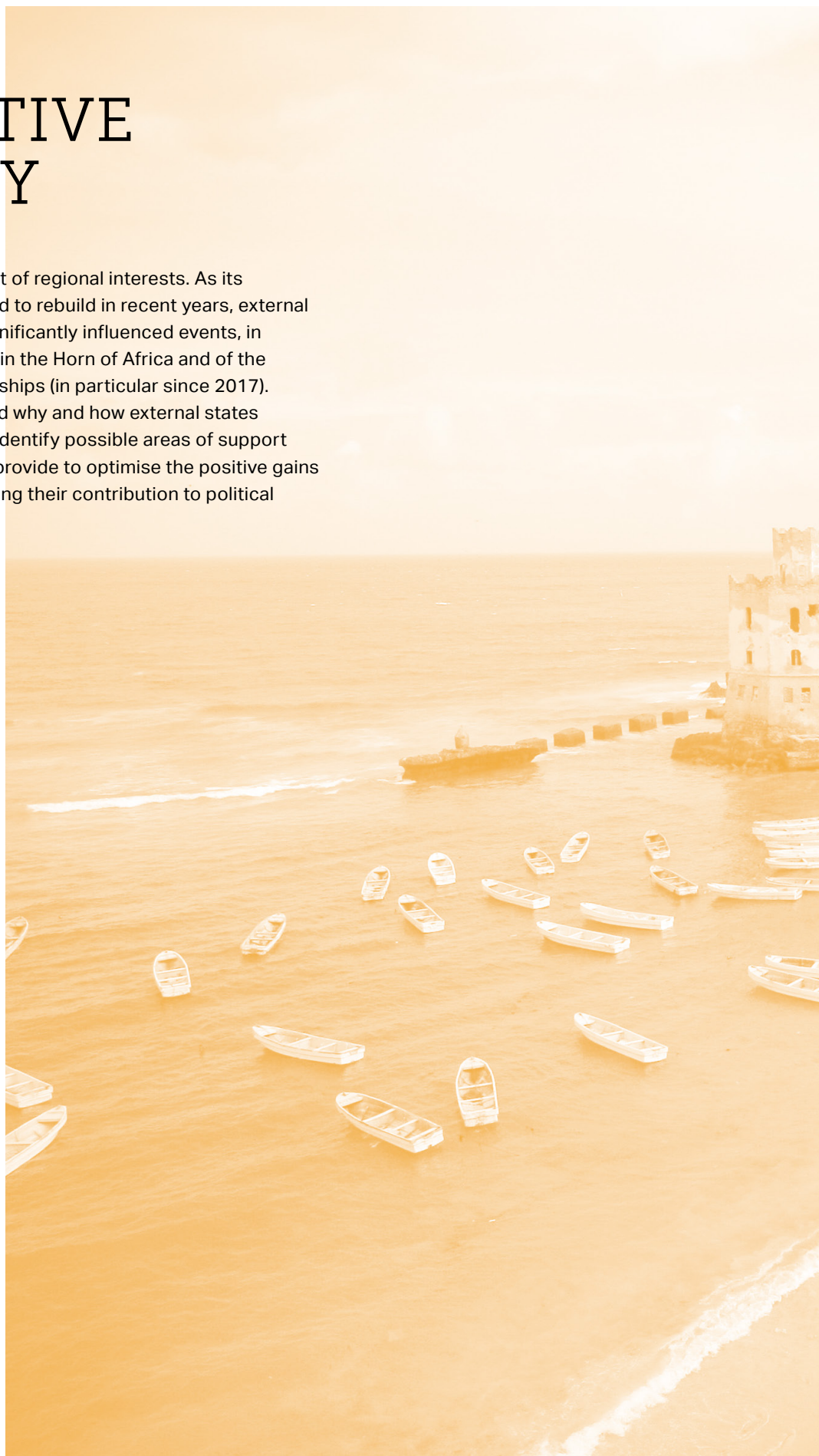
SOMALI PROVERB

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Somalia has long been the subject of regional interests. As its political structures have continued to rebuild in recent years, external engagements in Somalia have significantly influenced events, in the contexts of both fluid politics in the Horn of Africa and of the complexities of intra-Gulf relationships (in particular since 2017). This research seeks to understand why and how external states engage in Somali politics, and to identify possible areas of support the international community can provide to optimise the positive gains to the Somali state, while minimising their contribution to political competition or conflict.





1.1 MAPPING REGIONAL INTERESTS

The research covers the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea, Gulf, and wider MENA regions. Drawing on the primary data from our interviews with decision-makers in the region and on our review of secondary literature, we set out below the interests of these regional partners. In summary, these generally fall under four main categories, all linked to Somalia's geography:

Across the region: a need to protect trade and economic interests, including specifically maritime trade and access to ports

In the case of certain players, notably Turkey and Qatar: to project political and diplomatic influence into the Horn of Africa, and to use Somalia as a gateway to or 'calling card' for Africa more widely

For the other Gulf and Middle Eastern players: to harness Somalia in support of their position on intra-Gulf issues, or at least to ensure that Somalia isn't used against their geostrategic interests

For the Horn players: a perception that they wish to engage sufficiently to deliver political and national security interests, while avoiding building a competing power in the region that could threaten their interests, including potentially with respect to border communities and boundaries.

KEY FINDINGS BY COUNTRY:

The UAE:

- The UAE has been largely motivated in its relationship with Somalia by trade and maritime interests. Since the 2017 Gulf crisis and Qatar's greater focus on Somalia, UAE has also been motivated by the need to protect its regional interests, but the idea that Somalia is the Gulf's 'ideological proxy theatre' oversimplifies UAE interests in the country.
- The significant political fallout between the UAE and the FGS in April 2018 reinforced the UAE's shift of focus to Somalia's federal member states (FMSs). The UAE's presence in Somalia and the wider Horn region is anchored to its major commercial investments in ports: Somaliland's Berbera and Puntland's Bossaso.

Qatar:

- Since the 2017 Gulf crisis, Qatar has significantly increased diplomacy with non-blockading countries, including Somalia, in support of what it deemed a matter of national survival. In this period, Somalia has experienced competition for influence between Qatar and the UAE. Qatar's approach to political Islam, however, has not been a significant factor.
- Qatar's engagement in Somalia since 2017 has focused on the FGS, in particular on President Mohamed, Abdullahi Mohamed (Farmajo) and former national intelligence chief, Fahad Yasin. However, many Somali actors were critical of the use of political financing as a tool of influence by Gulf players, with Qatar's engagement attracting particular comment. Qatar's future positioning in Somalia following the planned federal elections remains to be seen.
- Qatar seeks to play a positive role in the region through its capacity for mediation of political tensions, notably in disputes between Somalia and its neighbours.
- While Qatar and Turkey are broadly perceived as aligned in Somalia, as elsewhere, their respective interests, approaches, and footprint in Somalia are different. Moreover, and in contrast to Turkey, most Somali interviewees were concerned that Qatar sought a level of political influence on Somalia's FGS disproportionate to its investment, trade, or other development support.

Saudi Arabia:

- Though Saudi Arabia is considered a major regional player, its engagement with Somalia has been limited—both by the crisis in Yemen as well as by domestic issues. While broadly aligned with the UAE's policies, it does not have matching commercial interests.
- Saudi Arabia's spearheading of the new multilateral Red Sea Council—of which Somalia is also a member—might pave the way for increased direct engagement in Somalia in coming years.

Turkey:

- Turkey's humanitarian response to Somalia's famine in 2011, along with President Erdogan's visit to Mogadishu, proved a springboard in the relationship. The Turkish government has since developed a

comprehensive programme of development support for Somalia, packaged to be visible and appealing to Somalis. Over a decade, trade and financial relations have become important, both at government level and through the large Somali diaspora in Turkey.

- Turkey has also trained a third of Somali government security forces and established a large military base in Mogadishu in 2017. The political risks in this support were apparent in February 2021, when Turkish-trained Somali forces participated in violence in Mogadishu during the dispute over President Farmajo's term extension.
- Turkey was praised by Somali interviewees for what is seen as apolitical support to the Somali people. Turkish contacts nonetheless acknowledged a Turkish interest in projecting influence and a security presence into Africa through Somalia, and that Erdogan sought to use Turkey's role in Somalia as a "calling card" to build relationships with other African countries.
- Turkey's financial constraints may reduce future spending in Somalia.

Kenya:

- Security and commercial interests across their border, both maritime and land, contribute to a complex relationship between Kenya and Mogadishu. At the time of writing, Kenya had not accepted the recent ICJ ruling on the maritime border dispute between the two countries.
- Kenya's domestic security threats from Al-Shabab (AS) have driven the country to use Somalia's Jubbaland state as a buffer zone. Kenya has backed Jubbaland's President Ahmed Mohamed Islam (Madobe) since 2011, to the detriment of its relationship with Mogadishu. The presence of the Kenyan Defence Forces in Jubbaland, in addition to the mandated AMISOM contingent, has generated controversy amid allegations of their engagement with AS and the Jubbaland government in illicit trade.
- The large Somali diaspora in Kenya, many from the Ogaden clan to which the Jubbaland president belongs, is influential in business and other realms.
- Jubbaland has also been the site of contention between the Kenyan and Ethiopian militaries and Somalia's national and Jubbaland forces. This resulted in direct confrontations in 2020 and in deteriorated regional stability.

- While land borders are not the subject of active dispute, there is a perception in Somalia that Kenyan and Ethiopian policymakers seek to avoid Somalia becoming a rival pole of attraction for border communities, and thus that they look to keep Somalia subordinate in the region.

Ethiopia:

- Ethiopia and Somalia share a border of over 1,500 kilometres, and Ethiopia's Somali Regional State is home to significant Somali (as well as Oromo) population. Ethiopia has significant security, social, and political interests in the border region.
- Prior to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's appointment in 2018, Ethiopia had a history of providing military and other forms of support to Somali non-state actors and armed groups, maintaining influence through a 'divide and rule' approach.
- Abiy reversed this policy, redirecting Addis Ababa's engagement to the FGS under Farmajo (although this has not prevented Ethiopia maintaining its stake in Somaliland's Berbera port, notwithstanding the FGS objections to the project).
- Over the past year, Addis Ababa's preoccupations with Ethiopia's internal developments, above all the war in Tigray, has led to a draw-down of Ethiopian contribution to AMISOM's deployment against AS and reduced Ethiopian focus on the Somali Regional State.

Eritrea:

- Eritrea has a historical record of competing for influence in Somalia with Ethiopia, and of supporting armed groups and fuelling instability in Somalia. However, 2018 saw the emergence of a tripartite alliance between the leaders of Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. This has reduced the competitive pressures between the participants but has nonetheless attracted criticism: it was described to us as an informal and opaque agreement which has undermined IGAD and side-lined Kenya and Djibouti. Widespread but unsubstantiated reports of Eritrea deploying Somali troops in support of the Ethiopian army in Tigray have added to domestic political stresses in Somalia.

Djibouti:

- Djibouti's population has a large proportion of ethnic Somalis, including the country's president. This fact supports a broadly positive relationship of support to the FGS and a strong relationship with the Somali

private sector. Nonetheless, Djiboutian interviewees acknowledged some difficulties in the relationship with the current president.

Sudan:

- The 1990s, in the early years of Somalia’s civil war, saw active bilateral engagement between Sudan and Somalia, driven by the two countries’ respective confrontations with the US. Generally, Sudan sees Somalia as having potential leverage against “troublesome neighbours” such as Ethiopia and Kenya and has therefore wished to support a strong Somalia. However, Prime Minister Hamdok’s

government was more focused on domestic issues, and Sudan’s coup in October 2021 renders the relationship even less clear.

Egypt:

- Egypt is relatively less active in Somalia, though in principle would wish to gain leverage in Somalia against its rival, Ethiopia. Media reporting has suggested that Egypt has provided financial support to political candidates in Somalia in exchange for potential political support. Egypt has also provided scholarships for Somali students to study in Egypt and has a shared Sufi base.

1.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING IMPROVED REGIONAL COOPERATION IN SOMALIA

This report offers a menu of potential options for international engagement, all contingent on the unfolding political context in Somalia. These proposals each address one or more of the categories of motivation identified in the analytical section. Implementation of these approaches might be facilitated by administrative and specialist resource, operating from one or more bodies commanding broad trust of regional and Gulf players, as well as of the Somalis, and able to maintain focus on the development of a Somalia as a coherent neighbour and a force for peace and prosperity in the region.

SUPPORT TO MULTILATERAL FORUMS:

- **(Re)invigorate multilateral dialogue:** Provide support aimed at (re)invigorating dialogue between the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD), the African Union High Level Implementation Panel (AU HLIP), and IGAD–Red Sea Council collaboration in the wake of COVID-19–related delays. These mechanisms offer a cross-regional bridge that has not previously existed and provide opportunities for senior-level dialogue in the margins of formal meetings.
- **Engage on issues not yet covered:** Among ‘track 1’ actors, initiate multilateral dialogue on those most pressing issues which are not currently covered in existing forums. These might include competition over ports. Given the sensitivity of these issues, dialogue must be approached carefully; an initial entry point could be bilateral engagement with Egypt and Saudi Arabia to signal support for the RSC.¹

- **Foster study, within multilateral forums, of the management in other regions of maritime cooperation.** Examples might include importing technical knowledge from the Baltic Sea and other zones of maritime competition or cooperation around the world as the basis for developing a shared vision for the Red Sea.



- **Support Somalia as an 'overlap state' to be an active proponent for IGAD and the RSC.** Somalia has membership in each of the relevant multilateral mechanisms (also including the AU and the Arab League) and therefore should be encouraged to act as a lynchpin. Somalia's delegates in the organisations could be supported to advocate for and mobilise further collaboration.
- **Create opportunities for track 1.5 and 2 actors to participate in multilateral/regional dialogue and advocacy** by identifying civic actors with influence in one, or ideally more than one, of the relevant countries—media, analysts, businesses and civil society—to input into track 1 discussions. Such actors may be better placed than state actors to take the initiative in discussions around issues such as the environment and climate, encouraging formal and informal trade linkages, and promoting cultural or education exchange.
- **Facilitate enhanced collaboration among special envoys.** The proliferation of special envoys to Somalia, the Horn, and Red Sea regions signals the interest of multilateral organisations and external countries in this space. COVID-19 has hindered their coordination. Given that the activities by the relevant organisations and external partners are often anchored through their special envoys, facilitating communication and collaboration could be of value.



ENGAGE THE SOMALI BUSINESS ELITE

- **Engage with the Somali Business Council (SBC) as 'peacebuilding and state-building partners'.**

The Council, based in Djibouti, has membership from almost all of Somalia's major businesses, and therefore represents a valuable entry point to this constituency, which has influence both in Somalia and in other key countries. Donor instruments could approach and support the SBC as a formal 'peacebuilding and state-building partner' for Somali FGS and FMS leaders or for multilateral forums. Less sensitive topics, such as supporting a more conducive regional trade environment, could be tabled first, followed by more critical issues.

- **Support the Somalia Chamber of Commerce to engage with their external counterparts.**

Somalia's national Chamber of Commerce based in Mogadishu could be facilitated to engage with the chambers of commerce located in the key external countries. Discussions which encourage mutual trade opportunities and investment between these countries and seek to build out from or stabilise otherwise fraught political relations could be supported through these groups.

- **Engage the FMS-level chambers of commerce.**

Somalia also has chambers of commerce in each of the FMSs. These collectives could also serve as a 'partner' in domestic and FMS-level issues, given that many external players pursue their interests directly through the FMSs. The FMS-level chambers could encourage dialogue and cooperation regarding the interventions of external actors.

- **Approach key Somalia transnational companies directly.** Somalia's business landscape is dominated by a few key companies—above all Hormuud and Dahabshiil. These companies have apparently already expressed interest in expanding from purely commercial roles to humanitarian and other realms. The leaderships of these companies could be approached as peacebuilding and state-building partners and brought into discussions with Somali government actors or multilateral forums.

ENCOURAGE MORE SENSITIVE EXTERNAL INVESTMENTS AND INTERVENTIONS

- **Encourage research and dialogue on the impact of external investments.**

Donor instruments could support research on the impacts of externally driven investments among local communities and conflict dynamics as the basis for public or closed-door dialogues between actors/representatives from governments, businesses, civil society, researchers, and media.

- **Approach external large ('mega') companies and parastatals directly.**

Key commercial/parastatal entities in this arena, such as DP World, Albayrak, and the Qatar Ports Management Company, could be approached by donor instruments directly to initiate engagement on the *long-term benefits* of conflict sensitivity, social protection and safeguarding, and better environmental standards.

- **Link up with other multilateral processes and initiatives involving the Somali business elite.**

Given the sheer scale and the weight of state-backing behind large projects such as port development in Somalia, efforts to influence them should be approached from several levels. Multilateral mechanisms could be used to approach these entities at the higher levels. The Somali business and political elite also may also have linkages or relations with these external commercial and parastatal entities.

SUPPORT TRILATERAL BORDER COOPERATION

- **Provide support to trilateral border cooperation processes.** Donor instruments could convene forums around mutual areas of interest or concern between Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya regarding their shared border zones; such initiatives could engage on different ‘tracks’. Discussions could begin with less divisive topics, such as ways to facilitate cross-border trade, before moving onto more critical issues, such as potential refugee flows from Ethiopia, or airing and neutralising historical concerns and perceptions about politics in the borderlands.
- **Track 1 - Dialogue between political leaders on key issues.** Donor instruments could convene political dialogue between senior actors from border-adjacent areas in the three countries (counties in north-east Kenya, Ethiopia’s SRS, and Jubbaland) and from Mogadishu, Nairobi, and Addis Ababa on issues such as refugee flows, border security, and trade. The inclusion of Ogaden political elites would be of merit here. These processes could also be linked up with parallel efforts engaging multilateral mechanisms, especially IGAD. Where possible, donor instruments could provide technical assistance to address issues mutually identified.
- **Track 1.5/2 – Events to present research and hold public discussion.** Donor instruments could organise public forums, in which research papers on key border issues are presented by researchers and analysts, along with media, civil society, and business elites, as the basis for public discussion on fostering shared interests in the border zones. These events could be conducted in conjunction with the track 1 political dialogues, with scope for direct government–civil–society engagement. Where possible, donor instruments could provide technical assistance to address issues mutually identified.
- **Track 3 – Assess opportunities to engage border communities.** To be effective and do no harm, cross-border programming on the ‘track 3’ or grassroots level in this context would first require in-depth localised political economy or conflict analysis. On this basis, donors could support activities at this level to bring together community-level actors, other local forms of leadership, and business actors to discuss cooperation around local trade, community security, and resilience.

BUILD CONSENSUS AMONG SOMALI ACTORS

- **Convene FGS and FMS officials for dialogue on external engagement.** Donor instruments could convene FGS officials—especially those from ministries or departments that engage directly with external actors—and their FMS representatives, especially in states where significant external engagements are ongoing (Puntland, Jubbaland and Galmudug), to share their perspectives and explore areas of consensus. The emphasis should be on the *types of behaviour and actions* among Somali elites and external players that are positive or negative for the country, and what their role as Somali leaders could be vis-à-vis these external interests. The outcome could be a public joint communique.
- **Create space for civil society or ‘track 1.5’ or ‘track 2’ actors to input into public discussion on external engagement.** Avenues should be supported for Somali activists, researchers, media, and business actors to input into public discussion around the nature of external involvement. These actors have typically been excluded from such elite interactions. This could take the form of either/both public/online forums and media/social media content, or even by directly inviting these actors to sit in the room with the FGS and FMS officials to participate in aspects of the discussions.

2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

Somalia has long been the subject of regional interests. As the country's political structures have continued to rebuild in recent years, it has been evident that external engagements have had a significant influence on events in Somalia, in the contexts of both the fluid politics of the Horn of Africa—notably around Somalia's long borders with Ethiopia and Kenya—and of the complexities of intra-Gulf relationships (in particular since 2017) and their projection onto Somalia.

This research seeks to set out why and how external states engage in Somali politics, and to identify possible support the international community can provide to optimise the positive impact of such involvement, while minimising their contribution to political competition or conflict. Its objectives are to:

- Map the current regional dynamics affecting Somalia: the interests and objectives of regional and Gulf states, the key actors, themes, trends and trajectories, and the present capabilities and methods by which they influence conflict, peace, and stability in Somalia.
- Explore the effects of these regional dynamics in terms of conflict and political stability in Somalia.
- Assess the factors that make Somalia susceptible to foreign influence and those that help to mitigate it, alongside the sources of leverage that Somalia has vis-à-vis regional and Gulf states.
- Draw on global examples of regional cooperation and bilateral engagements to enhance peace and stability in fragile states, focusing mainly on track 1.5/2 mediation and diplomacy approaches.
- Provide recommendations for the wider donor and diplomatic community to contribute to regional cooperation and influence the conflict sensitivity of bilateral engagement by regional powers in Somalia, focusing mainly on track 1.5/2 mediation and diplomacy approaches.

2.2 METHODOLOGY

An extensive review of the existing literature was initially performed. This included reports by governments, national and multilateral organisations, experts, academic literature, and technical reports accessible through specialised websites. The documents reviewed related to the regions and countries of interest in this research; the thematic areas, including multilateral engagement; multi-track diplomacy; previous and comparable initiatives; and relevant analytical frameworks. The literature was uploaded for qualitative data analysis using Atlas.ti which coded each document according to the research questions, themes, countries, and regions of interest. We reviewed 40 documents at this stage.² At the same time, the research team conducted remote consultations with five identified key experts on the subject matter to supplement and guide the literature review and initial design process.

The literature review was written up as a standalone report and served as the basis for the design of Phase 2 data collection, including considerations of the types of actors the research team would seek to interview, the key themes of interest, gaps, and emergent issues identified. Questions sets were curated for different research targets, such as those within Somalia, those in the Gulf/Middle Eastern countries, and those in Horn of Africa countries. Furthermore, prior to field work being started, SSF expanded the scope of the research adding Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Turkey to the initial list of identified countries. This entailed an expansion of both the literature review and the Phase 2 data-collection plan.

The research team travelled to most of the countries of interest within the scope of this research and obtained interviews with senior government and diplomatic actors, or with high-level analysts or academics who are positioned within or very close to the 'corridors of power'. In addition, some interviews were conducted remotely. The complex and politically sensitive nature of the research saw the research team deploy a political ethnography approach. Through the utilisation of the team's extended networks, high levels of access in each country were secured, frequently enabling interviews with actors who currently lead, or previously led, the decisions on foreign and Somali policy in each country, as well as with actors who engage with these external players within Somalia itself.

In total, the research team conducted 39 interviews in Phase 2 through July, August, and September 2021. In-person interviews were conducted in Somalia, Kenya, Djibouti, Qatar, the UAE and Turkey. Respondents for the other countries were interviewed remotely.

A variety of challenges or limitations when undertaking the primary data collection were encountered. COVID-19 travel restrictions constrained research team members' travel, resulting in re-adjustment of planning for interviews and, in some cases, cancellations. Interviews were rescheduled and held remotely where required. Moreover, the limited time frame for the project as a whole was prohibitive of the research team travelling to every country of interest and of the time they could spend in each location, subsequently limiting the number of interviews possible. The sensitivity of the subject matter in the context of instability in several countries of interest also raised political and security risks, impacting both on travel and on the willingness of interviewees to speak in detail of sensitive subjects, such as the upcoming federal elections in Somalia.

Overall, the main limitation was that for each country of interest the sample size was small and, for the most part, made up of state or state-affiliated actors. Inevitably, therefore, the primary data reflect some bias and politicised perspectives, or lack of alternative viewpoints. The research team has worked to mitigate this by triangulating perspectives with other interviewees and by corroborating with the secondary literature.

2.3 REPORT STRUCTURE

The sections of Chapter 3 provide a detailed analysis for each of the countries of interest in this study, exploring their interests, leverage, and manifestations in Somalia, and an analysis of relations with other regional powers insofar as they might impact Somalia. For the Gulf and Middle Eastern countries, it includes sections on the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. For the Horn of Africa, it includes sections on Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Sudan, and Egypt.

Somali actors are not passive spectators of external interventions; the relationships between Somalia and external states are two-way and shaped equally by the political, economic, historical, and socio-cultural realities within Somalia, and the interests and strategies of its elite actors. This is discussed in Chapter 4, based on interviews with government counterparts in Somalia and its federal member states.

Chapter 5 explores some of the potential platforms or entry points through which external involvement in Somalia could be better managed. This begins with a set of 'guiding principles', drawn from our data analysis, which form the foundation of subsequent recommendations in the report.

The subsections of Chapter 5 provide five sets of recommendations, under the following headings: i) Supporting regional platforms for multilateral diplomacy; ii) Engaging the Somali business elite; iii) Encouraging more sensitive investments and interventions; iv) Transboundary cooperation forum; and v) Building consensus on external engagement among Somali actors.

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3 MAPPING REGIONAL INTERESTS IN SOMALIA

3.1 INTRODUCTION: THE HORN, THE MIDDLE EAST, AND THE RED SEA

This research spans the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea and Gulf region, and the wider MENA region. Cross-regional or extra-regional dynamics in this arena are shaped by many factors but should, in particular, be viewed in the context of the following:

- First, the Red Sea has become a significant theatre for regional and extra-regional competition. It is the conduit through which most of Europe's maritime trade with Asia and parts of Africa must pass.³
- Secondly, sharp inequality which has been widening since the 1970s—when the oil boom coincided with the emergence of war and revolution in the Horn of Africa.⁴ The London School of Economics' Conflict Research Programme (CRP) illustrates: "The GDP per capita of the IGAD region is \$1,000; in the GCC region it is \$26,000. The three countries at the northern end of the sea (Egypt, Israel, and Jordan) have a combined GDP of \$658 billion; the four countries at the southern end (Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia, and Yemen) have a combined GDP of just \$42 bn. Egypt's GDP at \$331 bn is larger than the combined GDP of the eight IGAD countries at \$255 bn. Saudi Arabia's GDP is \$646 bn; the combined GDP of the other GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE) is \$750 bn."⁵ It is inevitable that Somalia and its Horn neighbours remain subordinate players in the wider political economy of this part of the world.

Somalia could be considered a key locus within the complex constellation of these cross-regional relations and interests—and, in some instances, the 'petri dish' in which these dynamics have developed. Broadly speaking, this research poses that the overarching motivations of the various countries within Somalia can be framed within four key areas:

- To assert or expand their maritime footprint and protection of regional trade and economic interests, and to keep competitors or threats at bay—principally with regard to ports and the protection of maritime trade.
- To project political and diplomatic influence and 'currency' on the regional and international stage.
- For the Gulf and Middle Eastern players, to position Somalia as an economic and political resource to support their external political interests, and as a gateway or 'calling card' for Africa more widely.
- For the Horn players, to enable Somalia to help deliver regional and national security interests, without building too strong a competitor to their own economic and political interests.

Drawing upon the primary data and upon the secondary literature, the following sub-sections of this report will detail, country-by-country, the interests and conditions which shape their high-level foreign policy within this cross-regional context, as well as the particular points of leverage and manifestations of each country within Somalia itself.

3.2 MAPPING REGIONAL INTERESTS: THE GULF AND MIDDLE EAST

UAE

BROAD FOREIGN POLICY MOTIVATIONS AND INTERESTS IN THE REGION

Red Sea ambition

The UAE's role and interests in Somalia sit within a wider set of foreign policy interests across the Gulf region and Horn of Africa. A regional advisor summarised the central imperative as being that— notwithstanding that it does not hold a Red Sea coastline—the Emiratis see the Red Sea as their 'backyard'. That is to say, the UAE fears that the problems it has faced with shipping routes— principally for oil, among other types of trade—in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, driven by its antagonistic relationship with Iran, could presage similar dynamics in the Red Sea.⁶

The UAE's interests in the Red Sea are often framed narrowly as 'maritime security', in the context of potential threats from piracy and other armed groups in the region, namely the Houthis and Al-Shabab⁷; and, in this connection, the UAE has established military bases on several Yemeni islands⁸ and in Assab, Eritrea.⁹ The overall sense from interviewees, however, was that the Emirati interest in the Red Sea should be framed as a broader desire to maximise its influence in maritime and regional trade matters.

A regional analyst explained that the Red Sea is a "major theatre for multipolarity", in which many of the most powerful states in the region and the rest of the world are competing for space to conduct maritime trade and, more broadly, to project power¹⁰: "oil is like the blood" and the Red Sea and Persian Gulf are the "arteries", and so UAE needs to "remove any blocks from those arteries."¹¹ The same analyst said that the UAE's foreign policy in the Red Sea area and beyond was therefore primarily defined by a desire for enhanced 'connectivity', which *invited* multipolarity and 'healthy' competition in trade from other powerful countries such as Turkey or China.¹² The analyst noted the annual Dubai World Expo and the UAE's welcoming of other countries' airlines operating in the region—in competition with Etihad and Emirates—as evidence of this welcoming attitude to commercial competition in its 'backyard'.¹³ A government advisor similarly cited the UAE's humanitarian efforts throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, which included distributing protective equipment and testing kits to poor countries—including its adversaries, Iran and Israel—in 2020, as demonstration of this neighbourly approach.¹⁴

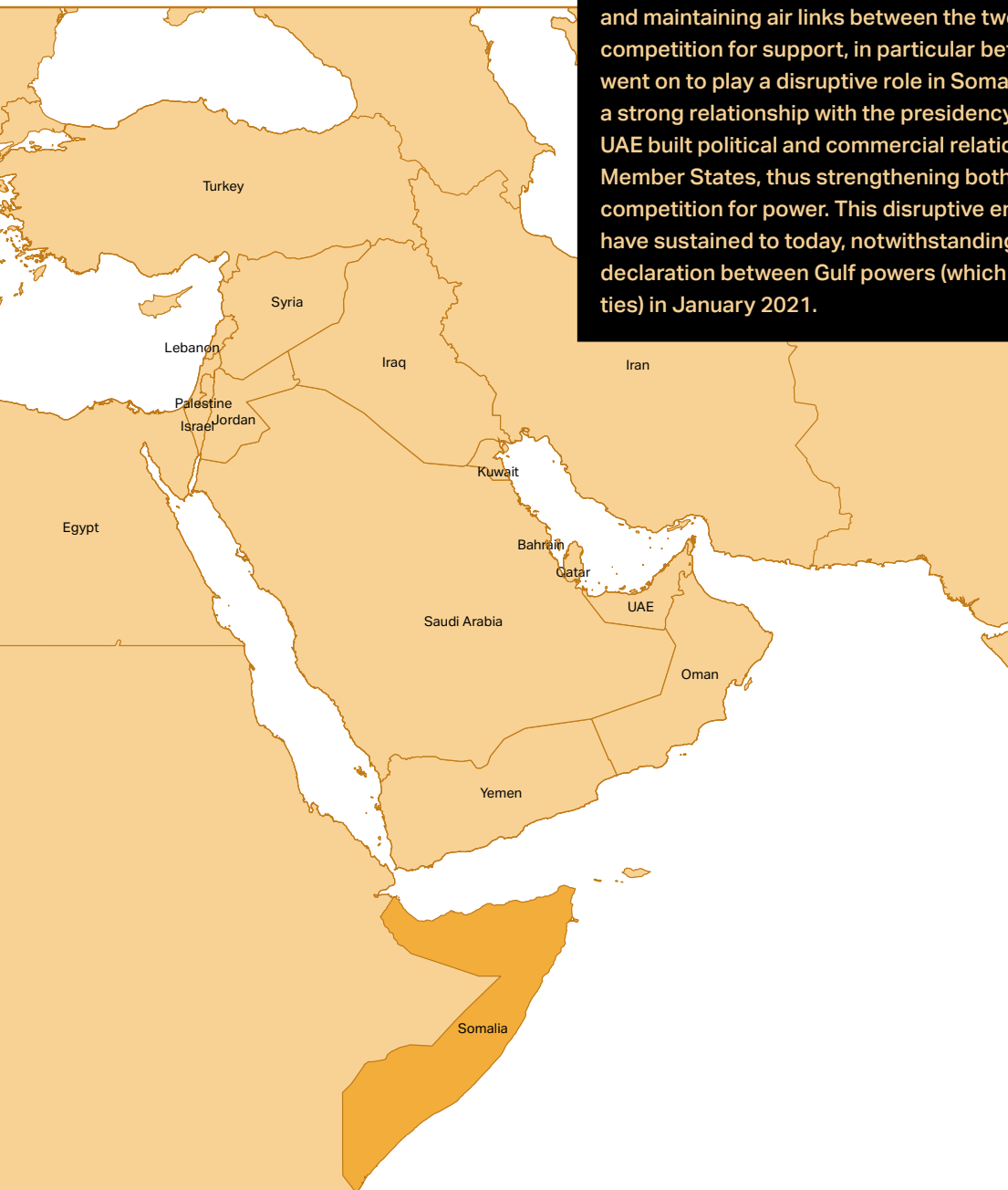
There is undoubtedly weight in this representation of the UAE's approach. However, some interviewees expressed some concern about Emirati motives: in Djibouti, where the Emirati parastatal company DP (Dubai Ports) World operated the country's major Doraleh port until Djibouti ejected it in 2018, interviewees described the UAE's positioning and interests in the Red Sea region as seeking to squeeze out commercial competition from regional players.¹⁵



BOX 1: GULF RIVALRY.

The 2011 Arab uprisings vested the Red Sea with strategic importance for the UAE and Saudi Arabia beyond core economic interests and led Abu Dhabi to view the Red Sea countries as its 'neighbourhood'. Abu Dhabi came to view groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, which have traction inside the Emirates, as an existential threat. In the 2017 'Gulf crisis', the UAE and Saudi Arabia challenged Qatar's relationships with Islamist groups including the Muslim Brotherhood, and with Iran, through a political and economic blockade.

The Gulf crisis led to competition for support in the Gulf region and its 'neighbourhood'. Somalia's status as an Arab League member, together with its geo-strategically crucial Red Sea positioning, made it an important diplomatic target for both sides. Officially Somalia remained neutral, resisting pressure to cut ties with Doha and maintaining air links between the two capitals. Nonetheless competition for support, in particular between UAE and Qatar, went on to play a disruptive role in Somali politics: Qatar formed a strong relationship with the presidency in Mogadishu, whilst UAE built political and commercial relationships with the Federal Member States, thus strengthening both sides in the internal Somali competition for power. This disruptive engagement appears to have sustained to today, notwithstanding the signature of the al-Ula declaration between Gulf powers (which restored their diplomatic ties) in January 2021.



Drivers of regional rivalry

Directly relevant to Somali politics is UAE's competition with Qatar, which has played out in the wake of the 2017 Gulf crisis (see Box 1). Interestingly, government or government-affiliated interviewees for this research in the UAE depicted the Emiratis' policy towards Qatar in varying tones. A regional advisor was explicit that the Emiratis viewed the Qataris as "nefarious"—an attitude consistent with most commentators' descriptions of the relationship since 2017.¹⁶ Conversely, a regional analyst described the relationship between the two countries as "strategic competition", noting that their interests were more aligned than they appeared. The analyst rejected the idea that the UAE had a problem with Qatar as a whole, though he accepted that it had difficult relations with some key members of the Qatari ruling family.¹⁷

Similarly, this research suggests that the UAE's relationship with Turkey is more complex and pragmatic than is often suggested. Notably, trade between the UAE and Turkey continued throughout the Gulf crisis, despite their diplomatic opposition.¹⁸ State-affiliated analysts in the UAE explained that their government's main objection to Turkey in recent years has been the Turkish efforts to establish a greater military presence in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea, as well as Turkish President Erdogan's expansionist tendencies and desire to "position himself as a supranational figure like Iran's [Ayatollah] Khomeini, above the government".¹⁹

Shifting approaches to foreign policy

The UAE's approach to policy in the last five or so years has evolved. As one analyst observed, the UAE interventions in other countries such as Yemen and Libya in the last decade started "clumsily", but more recently had become more sophisticated.²⁰ A government advisor explained that in the last year, the Emirati government had made an internal assessment that its "overseas adventurism" had not been successful, and so had begun an overall retraction of direct involvement, especially militarily, from other countries.²¹ The COVID-19 pandemic and economic downturn may also be encouraging this retreat.²² At the same time, several interviewees within the UAE government noted the considerable influence that the US' Biden administration has had in encouraging the UAE to 'soften' its relations and approach with rival Gulf nations and other players since 2020²³—consolidated by the signing of the al-Ula declaration in January 2021.

Few governments operate as a singular entity when it comes to foreign policy; in the case of the UAE, decision-making and implementation of foreign policy and overseas involvement appears somewhat fragmented. It is a federated state of seven emirates—of which Abu Dhabi and Dubai have the highest international profile—each with subtly differing interests; while its commercial sector is dominated by a set of large, heavily funded and powerful parastatal companies with global outreach. The respective roles of the government institutions, these parastatals, and the wider private sector when it comes to overseas involvement, is largely opaque—and deliberately so. As such, it is difficult to determine who exactly holds UAE's 'Somalia policy' or its other policies in the Horn region. One government advisor explained that there are different angles and perspectives within the UAE, rather than a single overseas 'grand plan', and that Dubai is generally more commercially minded than Abu Dhabi. An example is DP World, which is seen as very "forward-looking" and often "ahead of the government apparatus" in Abu Dhabi in its engagements in the Horn and across Africa.²⁴ Another government advisor similarly explained that the UAE government leadership has some key strategic goals and 'red lines' when it comes to certain areas of its foreign policy, with these decisions being made at the highest levels; but that other areas of international engagement were less clearly defined, with commercial parastatals and the private sector enjoying considerable freedom in their pursuits abroad.²⁵ That being said, in aggregate, the interests of these various actors and institutions continue to coalesce around regional commercial ambition and the projection of power.

SOMALIA-SPECIFIC INTERESTS AND MANIFESTATIONS

The UAE's political, geostrategic, and economic interactions with Somalia span several decades. As noted above, the 2011 Arab uprisings vested the Red Sea with strategic importance for the UAE beyond core economic interests, and led Abu Dhabi to view Red Sea countries such as Somalia and the wider Horn, as its 'neighbourhood'.²⁶ The Yemen conflict since 2014 further increased the Emiratis' investment in the Red Sea. According to ICG, when Abu Dhabi's relationship with Djibouti soured over the Doraleh port in 2015, Abu Dhabi worried that it could not rely on allies in the Horn and so sought to expand its strategic footprint. DP World and the Emirati military both proposed agreements to develop Somaliland's Berbera port.

A subsidiary of DP World later signed a contract with local authorities in Somalia's Puntland to develop Bossaso port. The Emirati attitude, as quoted by ICG, was to "fill space, before others do".²⁷

At the same time, since the early 1980s, the UAE has been a close ally and a strong trading partner of Somalia. Following the collapse of the state in 1991, the UAE became a host to the largest Somali companies in the hawala (remittance), airlines, and commodities sectors. Dubai has become the de facto capital for Somali business community so that they can easily access global markets. By early 1990, the UAE became the largest trading partner with Somalia. That only changed in 2015 when China became the largest trading partner. As its trade volumes declined, its relationship with the FGS deteriorated in 2017 at the dawn of the Gulf crisis. Somalia refused to join many members of the League of Arab States to blockade Qatar; as a result, the UAE has tightened visa rules for Somali passport holders, further weakening its trade with Somalia.

Within the midst of the Gulf crisis, in a high-profile episode in April 2018, Somali officials in Mogadishu seized \$9.6 million in cash from an aeroplane that had landed in Mogadishu from the UAE and accused the UAE of planning to use it to buy political influence and destabilise the country.²⁸ ICG quoted the Emiratis as stating that the funds had been to pay Somali security force salaries, which they had for some time been paying. Interviews in the UAE indicated that this incident was seen as the 'smoking gun' by the Emiratis—confirming, in their view, what they had already suspected: that the FGS in Mogadishu was siding with Qatar and Turkey in the wake of the Gulf crisis.²⁹ Notably, the year before, when Saudi Arabia and the UAE launched the blockade against Qatar, Somalia refused to join the boycott. After this incident, the UAE ceased all cooperation and support to the FGS. This included the closing of a military training facility in Mogadishu, where it had already trained thousands of forces for over a decade.³⁰ The UAE redirected its interests outside of Mogadishu to Somalia's Federal Member States and to Somaliland, where in both cases it made significant investments in port infrastructure, and in Puntland continues anti-piracy activities.³¹

Political financing

Political financing of key Somali political actors—incumbent or aspirant—has been one of the most opaque levers of influence by the UAE in Somalia (see Chapter 4: Somalia Internal Interests and Dynamics for more background on this issue). It has been reported that the UAE had supported regional states and some opposition actors, emboldening the bargaining power of sub-regional elites and thus contributing to "chronic political paralysis and violent contestation".³² In past elections, the UAE reportedly made payments to parliamentarians at federal and state levels (including in Somaliland) in order to influence federal and sub-national presidential elections. In the 2017 presidential election, the UAE invited all five presidents of Federal Member States to Abu Dhabi to oppose the incumbent and support another prominent candidate in exchange for a substantial sum of money. The UAE's preferred candidate lost the election, in part because regional presidents didn't use the money given to support him. In the January 2019 Puntland state assembly and presidential elections, the incumbent, President Abdiwali Mohamed Ali Gaas, was in part backed by the UAE.³³ More recently published research suggests that the UAE has abandoned such interference in favour of pursuing regional commercial interests in the FMS. These actions help the UAE to build its influence and enable its local allies to generate resources (for example, in Puntland, elites generate political finance from aid contracts and security rents (the UAE and the USA support military forces and bases, for anti-piracy and counterterrorism) and fishing licenses). While we encountered no suggestion of the UAE having sought to influence the current presidential election process, Somali interlocutors in Mogadishu noted their expectation that the UAE, as well as Qatar, would maintain the practice of political funding before this election is complete. Significantly, among all of the interviewees in Somalia for this research, from the FGS and Puntland and Jubbaland, there was again a unanimous sense that political financing by Gulf states had a negative impact on Somalia's elite politics and stability.³⁴

Ideology

The role of religion and ideology in shaping the UAE's relationship with Somalia is not clear-cut, even in the aftermath of the Gulf crisis and the April 2018 dispute. Certainly, during this research, when questioned on how much of a factor ideology was in shaping the UAE's interactions with Somali actors, the Somali interviewees—from both the FGS and Puntland and Jubbaland FMSs unanimously responded that mutual transactionalism, opportunism, and pragmatism overrode any shared ideological preferences between the UAE and Somalia. As one FGS minister commented: "There's not much of an ideology to speak of. The whole thing is driven by opportunism, on both sides of course."³⁵ Notably, in an interview, an analyst in a UAE state-backed think tank proposed that the UAE is not necessarily opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood ideology in principle, but rather the expansionist transnational political element of it, which they see Qatar as pushing.³⁶

In any case, a shared affinity based more broadly on religion and identity may play some role in the UAE–Somalia relationship. As one advisor to the UAE foreign ministry noted: "When the Gulf look at the Horn of Africa, they see a region that is half populated by Muslims, members of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Arab League... generally [until recently] they haven't looked as much at Kenya and Ethiopia's roles in the region, mainly focusing on Muslim countries like Somalia and Djibouti. Somalia is seen as an 'Arab world government', so it matters to them."³⁷ An Emirati government-affiliated analyst similarly posed that the UAE has a better understanding of Somali society and tribes than other external countries.³⁸ Other intangible factors were also cited by Emirati analysts as supporting the relationship: the federalised governance systems in both the UAE and Somalia, and the "vision of Dubai emerging from the desert", which they felt was aspirational for Somalis.³⁹

Trade and commercial interests

It was noted by many interviewees in the UAE and Somalia that, until recently, the UAE had been Somalia's main trading partner. This trade relationship had been fostered at the higher levels by large parastatals and high-level trade agreements, but also at the level of more small-scale business, in part driven by the Somali diaspora community based in the UAE.⁴⁰ In recent years however, the UAE's position as Somalia's main regional trade partner has been challenged by the ascendancy of Turkey, which is now Somalia's fastest growing trade partner. Interestingly, several interviewees noted the strong correlation between the volume of trade between two countries and the nature of their political or diplomatic relations: that is, when trade improves, often so do the political relations; and when trade reduces, the political relations deteriorate too.⁴¹ This does appear to be the case with the UAE and Turkey in Somalia, whose differing trajectories of political relations with Somalia have evolved considerably in the last five to ten years in tandem with their shifting trade relations.

The most high-profile of the UAE's trade investments in the region is the Berbera port in Somaliland—and, to a lesser extent, the Bossaso port in Puntland. In August 2019, the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) wrote that the decision by UAE and its parastatal DP World to enter into agreement with Somaliland for the Berbera port and corridor development—linking Ethiopia to Somaliland, the Gulf of Aden and Gulf states—was motivated by a variety of economic, political and security interests that predate the April 2018 plane-cash incident.⁴² These reasons included the UAE's role in the war in Yemen; its wish to use the agreement as leverage against the FGS in Mogadishu; and to demonstrate its weight against rival Turkey, who controlled the port in Mogadishu.⁴³ The UAE's military activity in Yemen created an immediate need for access to port facilities in the Horn of Africa that could support its air force and navy and help protect UAE shipping interests in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.⁴⁴ An advisor to the UAE foreign ministry observed that the slightly different interests of the different Emirates play out in this arena: Dubai is more commercially minded, and so is more interested in Berbera port, whereas Abu Dhabi is more politically and security-oriented, so has more of a focus on Puntland. However, the advisor added that the Bossaso port is overall less geo-strategically valuable than Berbera, and so has received less investment so far.⁴⁵

According to a recent political economy analysis of the Berbera development, with the creation of this major infrastructure development, DP World/the UAE may be expected to focus in the coming years on factors that will contribute to its smooth, profitable, and secure operation. The terms of the deal between DP World and the Somaliland government, some of which are not public, may become subject to wider scrutiny in the coming years, as was seen with DP World's running of the major Djibouti port.⁴⁶

Indeed, the UAE's investment in ports highlights further complexity in the country's relations with its Horn counterparts. The Emiratis' relations have not only soured with Mogadishu and Djibouti, but have also been in flux with Addis Ababa—which may have further ramifications for Somalia. The UAE until recently had a positive relationship with Ethiopia under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and had awarded Ethiopia a 19% stake in the Berbera port, among other forms of material support.⁴⁷ However, reputational risks associated with Ethiopia's war in Tigray since 2020—as well as the development of the tripartite alliance between Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea since 2018—appear to have complicated issues.⁴⁸ In particular, the UAE's unease around the tripartite alliance was said by interviewees in Puntland and the UAE to rest on the fact that the alliance seeks to empower FGS President Farmajo.⁴⁹

The UAE's humanitarian aid and development assistance in Somalia also comes with economic strings attached, with an emphasis on 'return on investment' for aid spending and market access. This is part and parcel of Dubai's efforts in particular to become a central player in the global humanitarian system: as Jason Mosely writes, "Market expansion is an explicit goal of UAE humanitarianism."⁵⁰ However, since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed limits on the UAE's aid spending abroad.⁵¹

Transition in Somalia

Somalia's federal elections are likely to render the nature of the UAE's involvement in Somalia—and even its Horn neighbours—into further flux. The elections have been repeatedly postponed, but at the time of writing (October 2021) were scheduled for November 2021. When questioned on whether they thought the UAE's relationship with Mogadishu might shift after these elections, interviewees in the UAE were reluctant to speak in specific terms, but explained that the Emirati government was "optimistic" about the eventual outcome, with an expectation that this would usher in a new phase of improved relations with Mogadishu. Indeed, all of the major opposition candidates were said already to have a positive relationship with the UAE, with some even having second homes in Dubai. While the UAE does have a widely known history of providing considerable cash support to presidential candidates,⁵² the nature of any direct support by the UAE to the current opposition candidates was not mentioned by interviewees. As discussed above and posed by a government advisor,⁵³ an overall retraction in the UAE's foreign policy risk appetite, in part influenced by US pressure, may influence the Emiratis' calculations of reputational risk when engaging with Somali presidential candidates.⁵⁴ In any case, it can be speculated that the outcome of the upcoming elections may herald a significant shift in the UAE's positioning vis-à-vis the FGS and FMSs (see Chapter 4 for more discussion of this issue).

QATAR

BROAD FOREIGN POLICY MOTIVATIONS AND INTERESTS IN THE REGION

While Qatar is not in Somalia's immediate neighbourhood, the 2017 Gulf crisis recalibrated Qatar's foreign policy calculations drastically with regards to Somalia and other countries in Africa and the Middle East (see Box 1 for background).

A SHIFT IN DIPLOMATIC APPROACH

According to interviews with Qatari officials and government-affiliated analysts in this research, the Saudi/Emirati efforts to isolate Qatar drove the government to invest heavily in its diplomatic approach in non-blockading countries, for what it deemed as a matter of 'national survival'. Qatar officials were explicit that the central aim of its foreign policy since 2017 has been "to prevent another blockade happening" and that "diplomatic relations became more important than anything else". This has driven increased diplomatic outreach and injection of state resources into allied countries around the world⁵⁵—what one interviewee labelled "chequebook diplomacy".⁵⁶ Before the blockade, Qatari officials explained that their diplomatic focus had been primarily on the US, EU, and P5⁵⁷ countries, but "the blockade changed everything"⁵⁸: officials noted that Qatar has opened some 20 new consulates and embassies across Africa in the past four years, in many cases deploying young and inexperienced diplomats.⁵⁹ The al-Ula declaration in January 2021 officially ended the Gulf dispute. However, the full normalisation of relations between the Gulf countries is incomplete; one Emirati analyst noted that "We now have a 'cold peace' with Qatar", in which diplomatic relations have been formally restored but state visits and direct interactions have so far been minimal.⁶⁰

It is notable that through this period, Qatari officials have continued to attach high importance to their diplomatic relationship with the US. Qatar hosted the negotiations between the US government, the Afghan government, and the Taliban prior to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. Qatar's positioning with regard to the US was said to extend to the Horn of Africa too: "Qatar ensures that it's always aligned with the US on strategic issues, including in the Horn of Africa."⁶¹

SOMALIA-SPECIFIC INTERESTS AND MANIFESTATIONS

Relations with Mogadishu

Qatar's engagement in Somalia since 2017 has been comparatively narrow, with the relationship seemingly being held at the Somali end entirely by FGS President Farmajo and his close ally, the former DG of NISA and current National Security Advisor, Fahad Yasin. Qatar's previous interest in Somalia was described by a former Somali diplomat as follows: "I have seen the Qatari engagement in Somalia oscillate between outright hostility to the state during Sheikh Sharif's presidency, to cordial but mainly indifferent during Hassan Sheikh's presidency, to extremely warm."⁶² The Gulf crisis had been building since 2014, and Farmajo's election in February 2017 came just a few months before Gulf tensions reached a head and Saudi Arabia initiated the blockade on Qatar in June 2017.

It is widely reported that the current relationship has been secured by significant cash payments made directly to Farmajo and his supporters by the Qatari government during election periods and throughout his incumbency. Qatar's footprint beyond Mogadishu is seemingly non-existent—the UAE and other external players dominate in the Federal Member States. Qatari officials interviewed did not acknowledge cash payments as political financing to Farmajo and other actors, but they did confirm their focus on the FGS as the legitimate central authority of Somalia and argue that direct relationships with Federal Member States (on the UAE model) would violate Somalia's sovereignty.⁶³

The CRP writes that Qatar has indirectly provided financial backing to the last two winning FGS presidents. The CRP provides the example that the appointment of Hassan Khaire as prime minister "reflected the ever-shifting alliances that characterise Somalia's political marketplace, as Khaire was firmly in Hassan Sheikh's camp for much of the election campaign. The core ruling cabal—which came to be known as the 'FFK'—was completed by Fahad Yasin, appointed as head of the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA); Yasin was also able to bring Qatari money to Farmajo's camp."⁶⁴ Fahad Yasin worked for Qatari state-backed news agency Al Jazeera from 2005–2011, and Somali interviewees asserted that he built very close relationships with the Qatari ruling family during that period.⁶⁵ Farmajo appointed Yasin as his campaign

manager in the 2017 elections and later as Chief of Staff for Villa Somalia, before becoming the chief of NISA in 2019.

As noted above in the UAE section, Somali interviewees (from the FGS and FMSs) were unanimous that cash payments as political financing to individuals by Gulf countries had a detrimental effect on Somalia's elite politics and overall stability; specific reference was made to both Qatar and the UAE.⁶⁶ Among interviewees within or associated with the FGS, the Qatari role was highlighted as particularly divisive and unpopular, including because it has not been seen to deliver wider political or commercial benefit.⁶⁷

While Qatar's increased engagement in Somalia since the Gulf crisis (see Box 1) is sometimes assessed to have a strong ideological element to it, interviews in this research from both the Gulf and Somali sides reported otherwise. As noted elsewhere, Somali interviewees unanimously stated that the role of ideology in shaping Gulf relations with Somalia was minimal or none at all—that the relations were purely transactional. Qatari interviewees did not mention ideology when asked about their motivations for engaging in Somalia. Qatar's primary Somali contact, President Farmajo, is not generally believed to pursue Islamist politics or beliefs (though Yasin is reported to be a Salafist).⁶⁸ Other literature corroborates this analysis; an RVI report unpacks Qatar's position among the external actors with interests in Somalia: "While it is often assumed that a major driver of Qatari involvement in the Horn of Africa is its support for political Islam, the reality is more complicated and nuanced. As one commentator explains 'Qatar is not a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood [per se]. The country supported different political forces during the Arab Uprisings, like left-wing stakeholders.' ... support from Doha for political Islam has largely been 'instrumental' and 'opportunistic', as Doha seeks influence through access to political actors perceived as having power or capacity."⁶⁹

Somalia's federal elections have been scheduled for November 2021 (at the time of writing, October 2021), raising questions about how Qatar might engage with any political transition. According to a Qatari official, Qatar recently sent a Special Envoy to Somalia, Mutlaq Al-Qahtani, to reassure officials that Qatar wants a cordial relationship with Somalia, regardless of who is president.⁷⁰ Somalia historically and to date has an 'anti-incumbency tendency', meaning that a Somali president has never served

more than one term in office consecutively.⁷¹ This, coupled with criticism over a number of Farmajo's political moves in recent years, renders the outcome of the elections extremely uncertain. Moreover, his close supporter, Fahad Yasin, was sacked from his position as head of NISA in September 2021 by FGS Prime Minister Roble. Given that Qatar's position in Somalia is believed to be anchored principally through Farmajo and Yasin, it is unclear how Doha's position might shift following elections. Two analysts in the Gulf suggested that as part of the talks around the al-Ula agreement, the US had discouraged interference with Somalia's elections—and, in general, Qatar will be aware of reputational risks at this time.⁷²

In early October 2021, FGS Prime Minister Roble visited Qatar and met with its top leaders amid a major feud between him and Farmajo over the sacking of Fahad Yasin as NISA chief. Following Roble's return to Mogadishu, the two leaders declared that they had reconciled and agreed to focus on elections. This drew widespread interest among Somalis to the role of Qatar in the rapid reconciliation between the PM and president after months of serious infighting that crippled state functions.

Qatar's engagements in Somalia

Regarding trade, importantly, Qatar has not had a significant trade relationship with Somalia, which sets it apart from other external powers including the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The lack of trade investment by Qatar in Somalia was widely noted by interviewees and was used as the explanation for why Qatar has never succeeded in building a more broad-based positive image in Somalia.⁷³ A former Somali diplomat complained that his efforts to persuade the Qatari government to open up investment in Somalia's private sector had met with no interest.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, Qatari officials posed that they had urged their private sector to visit Somalia and identify trade opportunities, albeit recognising the security challenges and Qatar's lack of a UAE-style manufacturing and export capacity. One recent exception to the overall picture has been Qatar Airways' opening of direct flights to Mogadishu after the Gulf crisis, and its use of Somali airspace to destinations in Africa and the southern hemisphere after other countries in the region had launched the blockade; a 'lifeline' for the flag-carrying airline.⁷⁵ Qatar is also a significant shareholder in Italian oil company ENI, which is currently exploring in the disputed maritime area between Somalia and Kenya.

In terms of development support, Qatari officials claimed that they also wanted to increase their humanitarian support to Somalia.⁷⁶ Recently, the Qatar Fund for Development has invested in the construction of a 122 km tarmac road construction between Mogadishu–Afgoye and Mogadishu–Jowhar, with a Turkish contractor implementing the project on the ground.⁷⁷ This has not convinced Qatar’s critics, with one Somali official acknowledging to us that this was “praiseworthy but should be seen in context: Doha has friends in high places and has leveraged on that personal relationship to essentially keep Somalia on their side during the Gulf crisis of 2017–2020. In exchange for that, it is funding high visibility projects to mask their otherwise deeply political engagement.”⁷⁸

Meanwhile, Qatar has also supported the training of some Somalia National Army (SNA) troops. According to a former Somali military official, in 2017/18 an estimated 1,000–2,000 Somali soldiers were taken to Qatar for training. This was an official, public arrangement, and the recruits were said to be well-paid and looked-after.⁷⁹

Consistent with its ambitions as a mediator, most publicly with the Doha negotiations for Afghanistan, in May 2021, Qatar involved itself in high-level mediation efforts between Kenya and Somalia following the diplomatic fallout between the two countries over the maritime boundary—highly sought-after because of its oil potential—and other political tensions.⁸⁰ Qatari officials explained that this was at the invitation of Kenya and Somalia.⁸¹ Qatar in previous years has also stepped in as a mediator elsewhere in the Horn: between Eritrea and Djibouti in 2017, and between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2018.⁸²

Internally, Qatar has also proposed leading negotiations between the Somalia government and AS. Qatari officials acknowledged that they had put an offer on the table to successive Somali governments, even prior to Farmajo, on the basis that they “know how to do mediation with non-traditional actors”, but that no Somali government had yet accepted the offer.⁸³ Quite apart from the broader international sensitivities, it is clear that this would be controversial in the region, with the UAE having stated that they would be heavily opposed to any Qatari involvement in talks between AS and the Somali government.⁸⁴ Media reporting in mid-2019 of possible Qatari engagement with AS in Bossaso,

Puntland, seeking to drive out their commercial UAE rivals, is unsubstantiated and apparently inconsistent with Qatar’s SNA training role mentioned above. Nonetheless, it adds to the regional delicacy of such a suggestion.⁸⁵

‘Alliance’ with Turkey

As noted elsewhere, Qatar and Turkey became officially aligned in the wake of the Gulf dispute and are often described as being aligned in their involvement in Somalia in particular, positioned on one side of an axis, with the UAE and Saudi Arabia on the other. Bilaterally, the two countries have provided each other with tangible support since 2017. For example, a Turkish official did acknowledge in an interview that some 5,000 Turkish troops have been stationed in Doha, serving as a deterrent to discourage Saudi Arabia from attacking the Qatari government.⁸⁶

However, this alliance is complex and should not be taken at face value. Within Somalia, Mosely has described some aspects of their mutually supportive relationship, whereby Turkey has used its relationship with Qatar as a springboard from which to develop far-reaching relationships in Somalia, making use of the longstanding links established by Qatar with former members of the Islamic Courts Union and the Somali diaspora: “The network of connections that Qatar has shared with Turkey is useful both in the attempt to establish institutions and—as demonstrated by Turkish involvement in the May 2020 release of the Italian aid worker Silvia Romano—in developing links with Somali intelligence services, led by Fahad Yasin—former director of the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA)—who has ties to Doha.”⁸⁷ When Yasin was sacked by Prime Minister Roble on 8 September 2021, he immediately left the country for Turkey.⁸⁸

On the other hand, as will be discussed further below, the nature of Turkey’s approach to and involvement in Somalia is separate and distinct from that of Qatar. A Turkish official formerly with the national development agency TIKKA, noted: “Regarding Qatar, as TIKKA we have a clear policy that we never work jointly with any other countries, Qatar has never provided a cent to Turkish projects. We don’t want to be seen as working with Qatar or anyone else on the ground.”⁸⁹

TURKEY

BROAD FOREIGN POLICY MOTIVATIONS AND INTERESTS IN THE REGION

Ambition for Africa and the Red Sea

In the last decade, in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings, Turkish President Erdogan has increasingly seen the Red Sea and Horn of Africa regions as within Turkey's purview. The motivations for this expansion of the Turkish sphere of influence appear to be manifold and play out in different ways. Turkish officials interviewed in this research noted the role of history; in the early part of the colonial period, both the east and western shores of the Red Sea belonged to the Ottoman empire⁹⁰ and, as such, the Turks view this area as its "version of the UK Commonwealth", according to one senior diplomat.⁹¹ Some observers have called this expansionist effort "neo-Ottomanism".

Turkish officials explained that the country has wanted to build a presence as a key player in the international arena for the past 20 years, including in Africa. They saw that Africa was "a frozen continent" and that Turkey could "unfreeze" it. Initially, the Turks began operating in Ethiopia in the 1990s, which was seen as the entry point to the wider Horn of Africa and wider continent—and as a more receptive entry point than North Africa. Subsequently, Turkey moved further into the Horn of Africa—including Somalia—as well as the Sahel and West Africa.⁹² In 2005, the Turkish government announced that it was 'the Year of Africa'.⁹³

The Turkish approach to the region under Erdogan has fed into the adversarial relationship between Turkey and the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Emirati interviewees expressed concern in particular about Turkey's Red Sea military ambitions and their desire to establish a major military base, which the UAE and Saudi Arabia see as a direct challenge to their own military footprint.⁹⁴ One interviewee linked this shift to Turkey's failed attempts to join the EU.⁹⁵ Emirati interviewees also expressed that Erdogan wants Turkey to become "the headquarters of political Islam"⁹⁶ and the "leader of the Sunni world".⁹⁷ Turkey's position in NATO also appears to be a sore spot, as Emirati officials argued that this insulates Erdogan from Western pushback against his policies.⁹⁸ It is worth reiterating here, however, that this rhetoric does not necessarily translate into concrete divisions: throughout the Gulf crisis, while Saudi boycotted trade with Turkey, the UAE continued its trade relations with them.⁹⁹

SOMALIA-SPECIFIC INTERESTS AND MANIFESTATIONS

The 'Somalia vision' since 2011

Regarding Somalia specifically, Turkey made modest inroads into Somalia from 2009, when Somali President Sheikh Sharif visited Ankara.¹⁰⁰ In 2011, media coverage of the Somali famine triggered the Turkish government at the highest level to intervene; President Erdogan visited Mogadishu with his family and a large delegation in August of that year. At the time of the visit, the Turkish Embassy was located at 'kilometre four', just three kilometres from where AS controlled the city at 'kilometre seven', so that Erdogan's visit was viewed as highly risky and a significant demonstration of his commitment to Somalia.¹⁰¹ During that visit, Erdogan appointed a new ambassador to Somalia, who led the process of building out Turkey's presence in the country and the new 'Somalia vision'.¹⁰² According to a former senior Turkish diplomat in Somalia, "Turkey's interest in the beginning was about domestic perception. They wanted to show the Turks that they care about their brothers and sisters around the world. Secondly, Turkish interest in Somalia was to show other African countries that they are good partners to work with."¹⁰³ In the years since, Erdogan has apparently remained committed to Somalia because the government has already invested so heavily and so visibly in the country, and therefore he "needs it to be a Turkish success story" and a 'calling card' in the eyes of Turks, other countries, and the international community.¹⁰⁴ During this research in July 2021, Ankara hosted a high-profile Somalia symposium, inviting Somali and Turkish policymakers and analysts, commemorating one decade since Turkey's major entry into Somalia. President Erdogan himself wrote a statement to be presented at the symposium, which is an indication of his personal interest in the relationship.¹⁰⁵ Today, the Turkish embassy in Mogadishu is the largest Turkish embassy in the world.¹⁰⁶

After providing a robust humanitarian response to the famine initially, Turkey began developing a long-term strategy for Somalia. Indeed, of each of the countries engaged in Somalia in this research, Turkey is seen to have the most coherence and consistency in its approach, encompassing various strands implemented by multiple Turkish government agencies, which they saw as complementary to an overarching foreign policy.

Turkish interviewees, as well as those in Somalia and other countries, were emphatic about the exceptionalism of Turkey's 'Somalia vision' and approach to the country, distinguishing it from the Gulf states. A former official in the Turkish overseas development agency, TIKA, explained that, "TIKA is unique in its approach as a development agency in that it tries to understand the real needs of the country by engaging locally and with the senior authorities directly. They have been able to understand the essence of what Somalis really need, and then they implement directly. They don't impose their own interests, or priorities, but just seek to understand the needs of the people."¹⁰⁷ In practice, this means that TIKA's work is highly visible to Somali people and highly tangible—more so than many of the traditional western development agencies operating in Somalia. In 2020, TIKA launched a country-wide survey in Somalia to better understand what kind of support Somalis themselves wanted—which was hospitals and roads.¹⁰⁸ Perhaps most significantly, the Turkish approach is distinct as, for the most part, it is perceived to be politically neutral and non-divisive, which emerged clearly through each of the interviews with Somali actors in this research.

The 'Somalia vision' since 2011 has included more typical development support: infrastructure support; the development and the rehabilitation of parts of war-damaged Mogadishu; health sector support; a large international scholarship programme and vocational training opportunities; and agricultural development. Notably, it also provides direct budgetary assistance to the central government in Mogadishu of 2.5 million USD per month deposited into the central bank—an important distinction from the Gulf countries, which are reported to provide unofficial cash support directly to key individuals as political financing.

Political and diplomatic involvement

In addition, it has included a set of activities that are perhaps more explicitly political, and in many cases more directly serving of Turkey's foreign policy priorities and bilateral diplomatic relations.¹⁰⁹ In 2012, Turkey hosted a large Somalia conference in Istanbul. From 2013–2015, Turkey also led mediation efforts between Somalia and Somaliland. A former diplomat noted that they also provided direct support to staff within Somalia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs—which only had six very young diaspora as staff at the time—and NISA.¹¹⁰ Since 2011,

Turkey has run a large scholarship programme in Somalia, which has sponsored several thousand young Somalis to undertake university-level studies in Turkish universities and to learn the Turkish language. The programme was described by the Turkish official who formerly led the programme as "'public diplomacy' [which] complements other aspects of Turkish foreign policy in Somalia".¹¹¹ Moreover, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also brought Somali diplomats to Turkey for training in its Academy for Diplomacy, which offers short term intensive bilateral diplomacy training in Istanbul and Ankara, tailored to Somali needs—for example, on mediation and conflict resolution, linked to the Somaliland–Somalia talks.¹¹²

Since 2014, Turkey has undertaken military training activities for the Somali security forces, and in 2017 established a military base in Mogadishu—its largest overseas military base.¹¹³ A Turkish official explained that Turkey's investment in the regional security sector supports bilateral trade, but also "looks good" to other countries and encourages further bilateral partnerships.¹¹⁴ Turkey also sees the Horn as an important market for the export of weapons and military hardware—a domestic sector in which Turkey has invested heavily in recent years.¹¹⁵ Turkish officials were insistent that the base was used solely for the purpose of Somali military capacity building and only training soldiers for the SNA, of which Turkey has trained around one third of the troops, with a focus on building up the rank-and-file.¹¹⁶ Turkey has also trained some of the elite FGS forces, the Gorgor and Haram'ad, with their senior officers being sent to Turkey for specialised training. Turkey also provides weapons, ammunition, and armoured vehicles to its trainees.¹¹⁷ Turkish officials view the military support as part and parcel of its other development assistance and human capacity-building efforts in Somalia.¹¹⁸

In the last year, Turkey's military training support has become more controversial in Somalia. According to the Heritage Institute, in December 2020, a coalition of more than a dozen presidential candidates urged Turkey to stop arming the elite police unit Haram'ad, alleging that President Farmajo was going to use them to "hijack" the elections. This was the first time that Somali political elites had criticised Turkey since 2011.¹¹⁹ In February 2021, Turkish-trained forces in Mogadishu were involved in the election-related violence in the city in which civilians were killed. According to Turkish officials interviewed,

this episode has raised some questions among the Turkish government about their continuing military support services, because the forces trained were intended only to combat AS, not to participate in political conflict, and therefore presents reputational risks.¹²⁰

Growing trade relations

Turkey's trade footprint in Somalia is a significant component of the bilateral relations between the two countries. The seaport and airport in Mogadishu are both run by Turkish companies, which is especially noteworthy given that these two infrastructures are the main source of revenue for the Somali government, and is indicative of linkages between the political and commercial relationships in both countries.¹²¹ In 2012, Turkish Airlines was the first non-African flag-carrying airline to begin flying to Mogadishu. Turkey has been also formally invited to become involved in offshore oil exploration, as part of an MoU signed in late 2019.¹²² In fact, there exists a complex web of trade, financial, and political linkages between the two countries, which clearly demonstrate the depth of the bilateral relationship. For example, an interviewee noted that some of the major Turkish companies operating in Somalia have very close relationships with Erdogan, which plays a key role in fostering the relationship and ensuring that Somali trade issues are always 'kept on the table' at the senior government level. The Turkish-owned Zirad Bank is soon opening in Mogadishu—the first international bank to have a physical presence. This is a watershed moment for the relationship, much like Turkish Airlines in 2012, and is expected to facilitate further Turkish–Somali trade. Indeed, the FGS's only foreign bank account is with Zirad Bank.¹²³

The value of trade between Somalia and Turkey is estimated to be 217 million USD annually. This is driven not only by the Turkish private sector within Somalia, but also by Somalis— including those in the diaspora in Turkey.¹²⁴ In fact, the Somali diaspora in Turkey is large and considered highly influential, in particular, because many of the diaspora are business and political elites. Istanbul is a hub for Somalis in Turkey, in Somalia, and elsewhere in Europe; as is Ankara, to a lesser extent.¹²⁵ As an illustration, the families of former Somali presidents Hassan Sheikh and Sheikh Sharif live in Ankara, as do those of many other Somali government ministers and elites.¹²⁶ The growth of the Somali diaspora in Turkey has been actively encouraged by the Turkish government;

Turkey readily issues Somalis with visas—one of the few countries that does so for Somali passport holders. Turkey also recently begun allowing Somalis to buy a Turkish passport—for 250,000 USD.¹²⁷

Ambiguity looking forward

Looking forward, the trajectory of Turkish engagement and interests in Somalia remains somewhat unclear. On the one hand, Turkish relations with the FGS in Mogadishu have weathered two regime changes, which would imply consistency in their approach and interests. Notably with respect to the current regime, Turkey joined Qatar and Ethiopia as the only three key players in Somalia who did not sign up to international statements urging Farmajo to reverse his controversial 2-year extension.¹²⁸ Turkey also now faces a new influx of refugees from Afghanistan and its spending on Somalia is under pressure, both from budgetary concerns, not least following widespread forest fires, and opposition criticism.

SAUDI ARABIA

INTRA-GULF RELATIONS

Saudi Arabia and the UAE are typically described as being 'aligned' on their engagements in the region, including with Somalia and Yemen, since the Gulf crisis; although one government-affiliated analyst in the UAE commented that "UAE and Saudi don't *always* see eye to eye. The UAE is very clear about its position on political Islam, whereas Saudi is less clear-cut"¹²⁹; and another Gulf analyst observed that "Saudi and the UAE are not the same in their interest. Saudi is more domestically focused and trying to get out of Yemen. UAE is much more interested and active in the wider region."¹³⁰

Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia has spearheaded the new Red Sea Council multilateral forum for littoral Gulf and Horn states; although the UAE does not have a Red Sea coastline, and is therefore not a member state, the majority of interviewees judged that the UAE would be able to pursue its agenda in the Council through Saudi Arabia.¹³¹

INTERESTS IN THE HORN AND RED SEA

Indeed, while the Red Sea Council is not yet fully functional—apparently due to COVID-19–related constraints—the formation of the Council may in principle signal an enhanced Saudi Arabian interest and positioning in the Horn region.¹³² Certainly, Saudi Arabia is a key regional player; as one interviewee put it, “Saudi is to the Gulf what Ethiopia is to the Horn.”¹³³ With its long Red Sea coast, it has a strong interest in Red Sea maritime security.¹³⁴ Its recent focus on the war in Yemen and on its adversarial relationship with Iran has limited its engagement in the Red Sea region and left it with a lighter commercial, military, and political footprint in Somalia than the UAE. Nonetheless, it has supported anti-piracy operations off the coast of Puntland¹³⁵; and historically, Mogadishu and Riyadh have enjoyed strong trade relations and an overall geostrategic alignment. In 2015, when Riyadh urged the FGS to sever ties with Iran, the FGS complied.¹³⁶ Before 2017, Somalia was among the troop contributing countries for Saudi Arabia’s military coalition in the war in Yemen, along with Eritrea and Sudan.¹³⁷

However, in 2017, Somalia refused to join Saudi Arabia’s and the UAE’s boycott of Qatar (with Riyadh apparently feeling “betrayed” by this¹³⁸). A number of other factors may have influenced Saudi Arabia to largely keep Somalia at arm’s length in recent years: Riyadh’s diplomatic energy is currently focused on dealing with the war in Yemen and keeping Iran, Qatar, and Turkey ‘in check’, according to one Gulf-based analyst.¹³⁹ According to a Gulf-based government advisor, sensitivities in the US relationship may have encouraged the Saudis to “tread more carefully” in Africa.¹⁴⁰ A Gulf-based analyst suggested that Saudi Arabia lacks a ‘DP World equivalent’ through which to pursue an economic agenda in Somalia.¹⁴¹ Economic pressures from the global pandemic since 2020 have also encouraged a retraction of Saudi spending abroad.¹⁴² On the other hand, an advisor based in the UAE also speculated that the January 2021 al-Ula declaration, cooling of Gulf tensions, and the upcoming Somali federal elections may encourage Saudi Arabia to articulate a clearer ‘Somalia vision’ amid its wider Red Sea interests.¹⁴³

Image credit: ©AMISOM



3.3 MAPPING REGIONAL INTEREST: HORN OF AFRICA

KENYA

Kenya's land border with Somalia spans some 680km, and they share a maritime boundary too; as with Ethiopia, Kenya's politics towards Somalia are determined by this immediate physical proximity and the complexities and challenges that this creates. Demographically, several ethnic communities straddle the land boundary and play a role in shaping relations on the border and between Nairobi and Mogadishu.

MARITIME BOUNDARY DISPUTE

A dominant concern shaping relations between Kenya and Somalia in recent years—one which hints at other Kenyan interests within Somalia—is the ongoing dispute over the maritime boundary between Kenya's northern coast and Somalia's southern coast. The disputed maritime zone, which covers around 100,000 square kilometres, is currently a rich fishing ground for both countries; but perhaps more significant are the oil and gas deposits and the prospect of future oil concessions.¹⁴⁴ The maritime dispute was submitted to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2014.¹⁴⁵ It has been argued that Kenya seeks to use its alliance with Jubbaland state president, Ahmed 'Madobe', as leverage against Somalia's FGS within this dispute¹⁴⁶—though it is noted that no Somali politician, even Madobe, will openly side with Kenya on this issue. Linked to other political manoeuvring between Kenya and Somalia, relations between the two countries regarding the maritime issue and other diplomatic disagreements were difficult through 2019.¹⁴⁷

A Kenyan former senior diplomat to Somalia unpacked some of the factors that gave rise to the current discord and underlined that the maritime dispute was hindered by becoming "emotional and politicised".¹⁴⁸ Kenya found Somali government negotiators liable to being undermined by its domestic opposition and by the high rate of political turnover. As such, bilateral agreements made have not always held. The former diplomat added that the Kenya–Somalia dispute had also been 'blown out of proportion' by certain 'self-interested actors' in Kenya (not identified) who wanted access to oil and tried to use the dispute as leverage.¹⁴⁹ The diplomat also suggested that the Kenyan government felt betrayed by the FGS over this issue, having been supportive in the FGS's formation.¹⁵⁰

In December 2020, IGAD sent a committee of experts led by Djibouti to Somalia and Kenya to investigate the issue, but their report was rejected by the Somalis amid claims of bias. In May 2021, Qatar begun mediating between the two governments over this dispute in a parallel process to the ICJ arbitration, which brought about a degree of normalisation to relations between Somalia and Kenya in May 2021.¹⁵¹ On 12th October 2021, the ICJ ruled in favour of Somalia, awarding it the majority of the disputed maritime zone.¹⁵²

MILITARY ACTIVITIES

Kenya's other principal interest within Somalia over the past decade concerns Al-Shabab (AS)—in particular, Kenya's desire to maintain Jubbaland as a buffer zone against AS incursions through north-east Kenya. On the back of a series of major terrorist attacks by AS in Kenya, Kenya has been engaged in combatting AS expansion, including through its contingent of troops within AMISOM; through direct deployments of the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF); and through its direct support to Jubbaland's President Madobe. Kenya feels Madobe is the best 'strongman' for the job of maintaining relative security and stability in the state capital of Kismayo and other parts of Jubbaland.¹⁵³ One former Kenyan diplomat to Somalia explained that "Jubbaland is animating the Kenya–Somalia relationship. Kenya wanted someone [Madobe] to ensure territorial integrity of southern Somalia. Kenyan domestic security became hinged on Madobe as an individual. If there had been a functioning Somalia government in 2011, Kenya wouldn't have needed to send troops in."¹⁵⁴

High-level regional politics in the Horn are also at play here: since the incumbency of Ethiopian President Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia has drawn closer to Somalia's central FGS under Farmajo, while Kenya remains heavily invested in Madobe—Farmajo's antagonist in Jubbaland. This divergence of formerly aligned interests has been felt within AMISOM, which contains significant contingents from both Ethiopia and Kenya stationed in different areas of Jubbaland. Friction within AMISOM has arguably contributed to a recent weakening of the force's operations against AS, creating space for further AS expansion within Somalia.¹⁵⁵ A Somali official in this research summed up the situation: "The irony is that these countries are doing both good and bad.

Take Ethiopia and Kenya for example. They're part of AMISOM peacekeepers, doing an admirable job in degrading the capability of AS. On the other hand, their [involvement in] the domestic political landscape...often deepens conflicts."¹⁵⁶

Kenya's interests and influence within Jubbaland extends beyond its role within mandated military operations. The presence of the Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF) in Jubbaland, in addition to the AMISOM contingent, has repeatedly stirred controversy over the years, inviting criticism that the forces are there to profit from the illicit trade of charcoal and sugar which is exported through Kismayo—and which the forces are reported to have collaborated on with both AS and the Jubbaland administration.¹⁵⁷

JUBBALAND INTERESTS AND TRANSBOUNDARY DYNAMICS

More broadly, there is also a significant economic component to Kenya's Jubbaland interests, given Jubbaland's potential to be one of Somalia's richest regions, with fertile farmland and rangelands and offshore hydrocarbon deposits.¹⁵⁸ Kenya's influence in Jubbaland politics began around 2009 with its support to the late Mohamed Abdi 'Ghandi' to form the new state, which then switched to Madobe in 2011, who was seen as the militarily stronger of the two through his command of the Ras Kamboni militia.¹⁵⁹ As noted, Kenya has invested heavily in Madobe as the central lynchpin in securing its interests in Jubbaland, to the extent that his critics have called him a 'pawn' of Nairobi.¹⁶⁰ Along with the UAE, Kenya provided finance to back Madobe during his election bids.¹⁶¹

Kenya's relationship with Madobe is also linked to his Ogaden clan identity which spans parts of Jubbaland, north-eastern Kenya, southern Ethiopia, and the wider diaspora, making them a powerful transboundary community within the Horn region. Madobe has instrumentalised this shared identity during election periods to elicit backing—particularly from his own 'elite' Ogaden lineage, the Muhamed Subeyr, which holds political influence across all three countries.¹⁶² In the complex constellation of actors involved in the transboundary Ogaden/Jubbaland political project, key figures also include the former Security Minister for Jubbaland, Abdi Rashin 'Janaan', formerly a Madobe ally and Marehan strongman from Gedo, who has latterly sided with Farmajo.

Janaan's personal interests also lie in his control of cross-border trade between Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia, and profits associated with international aid.¹⁶³

Interviewees in this research offered differing perspectives on the extent to which the Ogaden/ethnic Somali community in Kenya influences Kenyan government policy towards Somalia. One interviewee expressed that the Somali diaspora in Kenya does not have a "cohesive voice in Kenyan politics"¹⁶⁴, whereas another interviewee argued that the Ogaden community based in Kenya drives the Kenya–Ethiopia–Somalia regional relations and dynamics in Jubbaland; key Ogaden 'personalities' push to keep Jubbaland high on the Kenyan national agenda.¹⁶⁵

Enmeshed transboundary relations between Jubbaland, the FGS, Kenya, and Ethiopia came to a head in February and March 2020, during a confrontation between Somali central government forces (SNA) and Jubbaland forces in Jubbaland's Gedo region, backed respectively by Ethiopian and Kenyan troops. The incident was triggered by the FGS's imprisonment of Janaan, who later escaped from prison and was hosted by the Kenyan government.¹⁶⁶ The Gedo incident pointed to multi-layered and highly complex internal and regional fractures: among Jubbaland's Marehan sub-clans; between the Ogaden and Marehan in Jubbaland; between the Jubbaland FMS and the FGS; and between Ethiopia and Kenya.¹⁶⁷ Underscoring this dynamic, a second high-profile confrontation took place in January 2021 in Jubbaland's Beled Hawo, between the SNA and militants from across the border in Mandera, Kenya—reported to have been orchestrated by Madobe and Kenya.¹⁶⁸

HORN REGIONAL POSITIONING

Further complicating Kenya's regional relations and interest vis-à-vis Somalia is the 2018 tripartite alliance reached between the central governments of Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea (discussed further in section 3.1.8 below). As part of this shift by Farmajo towards Abiy Ahmed, an interviewee in Kenya claimed that "The FGS is using a stupid nationalistic narrative [about the maritime and diplomatic disputes] to make friends with Ethiopia. They are using Kenya to 'invent an enemy' to get closer to Ethiopia."¹⁶⁹ The interviewee argued that Farmajo was based in Kenya for two years before he was elected, but that he started using the maritime dispute with Kenya as a "scapegoat" and a "useful election tool".¹⁷⁰

An interviewee in Somalia reflected that the tripartite alliance was, in his view, “designed to throw the old guard in the region, Uhuru and Guelleh, off balance and reorient the region in a certain direction”.¹⁷¹ In any case, the outcome of the alliance is that Kenya, Somaliland, and Djibouti have been drawn into closer cooperation.¹⁷² A Kenyan analyst observed that Kenya is now trying to get closer to Hargeisa, signalled by Kenya’s establishing of a consulate in Hargeisa in 2021.

Kenya’s hosting of Somaliland’s leadership in December 2020 drove Mogadishu to announce that it was severing diplomatic ties with Nairobi, accusing Kenya of interfering in its internal affairs.¹⁷³ Djibouti was subsequently dragged into the dispute, when an IGAD fact-finding mission did not find sufficient evidence of Kenya’s interference in Somalia, which Somalia rejected, and accused Djibouti of siding with Kenya.¹⁷⁴ In 2020, Kenyan political leader Raila Odinga publicly argued for Kenya to recognise Somaliland formally as a state, though this has not yet translated into official government foreign policy.¹⁷⁵

TRADE LINKS

Kenya has strong trade linkages with Somalia, and the country is a key market for Kenya—both formally and informally. By way of illustration, an interviewee commented that in Mogadishu, many of the airlines and hospitality businesses are Kenyan.¹⁷⁶ A Somali official from Jubbaland noted that “Commercial transaction is a key component of Somalia’s relationships with [other countries]. For example, we in Jubbaland have a huge trade with Kenya, and thus we have a strong relationship with them.”¹⁷⁷ Kenya had a thriving informal trade in *miraa* with Somalia until 2020 when it was banned, ostensibly because of COVID-19 restrictions; though Ethiopia was permitted to continue exporting *miraa* to Somalia, reflecting the wider political fallout at the time. A Kenyan interviewee remarked that “Farmajo has totally mismanaged the regional Kenya–Somalia trade relations, blocking the *miraa* trade from Kenya. Farmajo should either have allowed free regional trade or blocked all trade, not singling out one country. He has politicised regional trade.”¹⁷⁸ Trade linkages work both ways, indeed, Somalis are believed to have more trade in Kenya than vice versa.¹⁷⁹ An interviewee posed that Somalis are excellent at doing business and control a major proportion of businesses in Nairobi, largely from the Somalia hub neighbourhood of Eastleigh, which in turn poses a threat to Kenya’s dominant Kikuyu business community.

Somali telecoms company Hormuud in particular was singled out as a direct competitor to Kenyan and Ethiopian telecoms companies.¹⁸⁰

FOREIGN POLICY COMPLEXITIES

Speaking broadly, Kenya’s government is often perceived as being fragmented, and, in the case of its policy towards Somalia, a degree of disjointedness is discernible in its approaches. One former Kenyan foreign ministry official commented on the lack of linkages between its economic, military, and diplomatic policies towards Somalia.¹⁸¹ A former Kenyan diplomat explained that in fact, it is this lack of coordination at the mid- and lower levels of state institutions which has caused the Kenya–Somalia relationship to deteriorate sharply in recent years, rather than any high-level Kenyan ill will towards Somalia. He referenced individual manoeuvring by oil-interested actors in Kenya which has fomented the maritime dispute and argued that “mistakes” made by the KDF in Somalia, which are not reflective of the high-level government policy, further degraded the relationship.¹⁸²

Kenya’s history with Somalia over several decades further reveals the complexity of their bilateral relations and Kenya’s apparent interest in its neighbour. According to a former Kenyan senior diplomat to Somalia, from 2000 onwards under President Moi, the Kenyan interest in Somalia was driven purely by Kenya’s wish to have a peaceful neighbour, wanting to form a functioning government that Kenya can work with and do business with, as well as seeking a solution to the large Somali refugee population in Kenya.¹⁸³ Speaking of the 2002–04 Mbagathi peace talks for Somalia, hosted by Kenya, the former diplomat remarked that “Kenya is the only country in the region that tolerated a 2.5-year-long peace process for Somalia. Most processes are just a few months! That shows Kenya’s commitment to Somalia.”¹⁸⁴ The former diplomat added that the Mbagathi process largely failed because of Ethiopia’s role in supplying weapons to Somali armed groups.¹⁸⁵

Going back further in history, the Shifta wars in north-eastern Kenya and the irredentist movement—led by ethnic Somalis to cede Kenya’s Northern Frontier District (NFD) to Somalia, which peaked in the 1960s—continues to play some background role in the perceptions held by Somalis, Kenyans, and Ethiopians towards each other.¹⁸⁶ The NFD irredentist movement was blocked by Kenya and Ethiopia, with Ethiopia being concerned that if it had been successful, Ethiopia’s ethnic Somali population would also attempt to join Somalia territorially.¹⁸⁷

There are no known contemporary movements for territorial irredentism among ethnic Somalis. Nonetheless, it is notable that Somalia today remains the only country in the region not to have formally recognised its state borders.¹⁸⁸ In any case, linked to this history, a fear of an overly strong Somalia, and a desire to keep it to some extent subordinate in the region, was said to play into both Kenya's and Ethiopia's policies towards Somalia in recent years. Certainly, several Somali officials interviewed claimed that both Kenya and Ethiopia still wished to keep Somalia weak and divided.¹⁸⁹ Kenyan officials disputed that this desire continues to inform their Somalia policy and reject the conflation of Kenya's approach to Somalia with that of Ethiopia.¹⁹⁰

ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia, similarly, shares a long land border with Somalia of over 1,500 kilometres, and Ethiopia's Somali Regional State is home to significant Somali (as well as Oromo) population. It follows that, like Kenya, Ethiopia has significant security, social, and political interests in its border region.

A CHANGE IN SOMALIA POLICY

Ethiopia has a long history of providing military and other forms of backing to Somali actors and groups outside of the central government authority, including Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama (ASWJ), Ahmed Madobe, Puntland leaders, and other 'warlords'. Ethiopian officials admitted to applying a 'divide and rule' approach to Somalia before Abiy's incumbency.¹⁹¹

However, since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in Ethiopia in April 2018, Addis Ababa has made an official *volte face* regarding its Somalia policy, redirecting its involvement towards the FGS under Farmajo. An Ethiopia official explained that all bilateral security support, as well as trade and intelligence sharing, is now only channelled through the FGS, ceasing all direct support to the FMSs and other actors.¹⁹² The dramatic high-level shift was said to be motivated by the recognition that a more centralised approach would better advance Ethiopia's national security and economic interests.¹⁹³ Moreover, Abiy Ahmed likely felt more of a natural affinity to working with the FGS because, generally speaking, he himself favours a more centralised approach to governance. Indeed, this affinity between Abiy,

Farmajo, and Eritrean President Isias Afwerki is believed to be a key fact underpinning the tripartite alliance between the three leaders since 2018 (see section 3.1.8 below for more detail on the alliance).

This strategic approach has not altered Ethiopia's commercial engagement in projects outside Mogadishu's approval; particularly in Somaliland, where it has maintained its stake in Berbera Port notwithstanding the FGS's objections to the project. An Ethiopian official argued that "Somaliland is a special case and the FGS knows that. Because of their claim to independence, and their de facto status, we have to work with them for pragmatic reasons. But we are trying to facilitate high-level dialogue between the two sides. We tried that in 2020 though it didn't succeed."¹⁹⁴ However, a former Ethiopian diplomat cited the Berbera port project as evidence that Ethiopia's 'real' policy towards Somalia had not fundamentally changed.¹⁹⁵ He argued that Ethiopia's recent retraction of involvement in Somalia's FMSs reflected Abiy's preoccupation with his ongoing domestic problems in Tigray.¹⁹⁶ Ethiopia would support Farmajo in the upcoming federal elections, but only because he was—in the near-term—a useful ally to Ethiopia regarding its adversary Egypt and other short-term interests.¹⁹⁷

Ethiopia apparently still maintains some 4,000 non-AMISOM Ethiopian forces inside Somalia, mainly located in South West and Galmudug states, reflecting the country's continued desire for security influence outside of the central channels. In parallel, however, there is concern that should Ethiopia withdraw troops from AMISOM in order to shore up its domestic campaign in Tigray, AS will exploit this to gain new territory.¹⁹⁸

DOMESTIC DISTRACTIONS AND REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The trajectory and eventual outcome of the Tigray conflict remains unclear. Beyond Tigray, Ethiopia is experiencing tensions elsewhere in the country, with some observers predicting that conflicts may emerge in the country's other ethnic-federal regions.¹⁹⁹ If Ethiopia's acute instability continues, it is likely that its neighbours will receive large flows of refugees; all five of Somalia's FMSs share a land border with Ethiopia. This would risk further destabilising Somalia's already volatile border zones and overstressing local resources. This scenario will most directly affect Kenya's Moyale corridor and northern counties which are adjacent to the Somali border and already face scarce resources, host large refugee populations, and suffer from chronic insecurity. Community tensions may further escalate with Kenya's general elections approaching in August 2022.²⁰⁰ The capacity for Ethiopian localised conflict to spill into other neighbouring countries was recently demonstrated in August 2021, when clashes in Ethiopia between ethnic Somalis and Afars triggered clashes between these two groups in Djibouti also.

In addition to these conflicts, Ethiopia faces a number of other major domestic upheavals. There has been an ongoing border dispute with Sudan in al-Fashaga since December 2020; at the time of writing (October 2021), Sudanese forces had captured the territory from Ethiopia. Also in the background is the long running feud involving Sudan, Ethiopia, and Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and allocation of Nile waters. These issues too were said to be distracting Ethiopia from its engagement in Somalia at present. However, a number of other issues continue to animate their bilateral relations and affect the calculations of other regional powers.

TRADE INTERESTS

Generally speaking, landlocked Ethiopia has been seeking to extend its 'soft power' through the transnational integration of regional transport and energy infrastructure linking the Ethiopian highlands, the Nile Basin, and the African Rift Valley with the coast. At present, 95% of Ethiopia's goods pass through the port in Djibouti, which Ethiopian officials feel is an overreliance and has driven them to look for ports to use elsewhere.²⁰¹ In particular, the Berbera port and corridor development—linking Ethiopia to Somaliland's strategic port, in which it holds a 19% stake—and its financial backing by the UAE should be seen in the wider context as one means of strengthening infrastructural links and diversifying external trade routes between the Horn, specifically Ethiopia, and the outside world. As noted in a political economy analysis of the Berbera development: "It is taking place because it is a means of furthering interests of a small number of major players whose interests overlap, even though they are not identical."²⁰² Indeed, the development has highlighted some differences of perspective between highland Ethiopia, whose interest lies in the corridor as a "friction-free" route to the sea, and ethnic Somali areas—namely the SRS—which increasingly see the corridor as a means to stimulate the local economy. In practice, these differences influence, for example, the location of dry ports within Ethiopia, and may continue to generate tension.²⁰³

As noted above, Ethiopia's relationship vis-à-vis Somaliland and Somalia is most challenged by the port deal. For the FGS in Mogadishu—which wants to maintain a monopoly on agreements with foreign companies and absorb lucrative rents and revenue from concessions—an unwelcome precedent has been set. In 2018, the parliament in Mogadishu formally vetoed the port deal, but the development has gone ahead regardless.²⁰⁴ For as long as Hargeisa's efforts to gain official state recognition fail and there is continued discord with Mogadishu, Ethiopia's desire to work directly with both governments leaves it politically exposed. Presumably for this reason, Ethiopia spearheaded renewed efforts to mediate between Hargeisa and Mogadishu in June 2020—an initiative which achieved modest gains in addressing technical disputes between the two governments at the time, now on hold until impending elections in both Somalia and Somaliland have been completed.²⁰⁵

Relatedly, Ethiopia is believed to have some interest in Somalia's potential hydrocarbon opportunities. While it has less of a direct stake than Kenya, landlocked Ethiopia apparently holds potential interests in establishing oil pipelines to the Somali coast, such as through the seaport of Hobyo, which is relatively close to the major oil fields in the Somali region of Ethiopia.²⁰⁶

POSITIONING OF THE SOMALI REGIONAL STATE

Ethiopia's Somali Regional State (SRS), while being officially incorporated into Ethiopia's Federal State, is economically and to some extent politically integrated into its neighbouring Somali territories: Somaliland, Puntland, and central and southern Somalia. For example, 50% of livestock exports through Berbera port originate in the SRS. The majority of goods for the SRS population are imported through ports on the Somalia–Somaliland coast, namely Berbera and Bossaso. Food aid for the SRS and other parts of Ethiopia also come through Berbera. In short, the food security and economic welfare of much of the SRS population depends heavily on the movement of goods across the Somali border, both formally and informally. Under the state leadership of Mustafa Omer since 2018, SRS has become more politically open, formal trade has continued, and informal cross-border trade has expanded, revitalising the economy. Ethiopian taxes are prohibitive on many traded goods and so they largely bypass the customs authorities or officials are paid off. Key figures in Ethiopia's federal government from the SRS include the Minister of Finance, Ahmed Shide; the House Speaker, Aden Farah; and Head of SRS Security, Hussein Kassim. Nonetheless, the SRS is not believed to have strongly influenced President Abiy's policies on Somalia in recent years—rather more likely, the SRS implements what Abiy decides. As mentioned above, under Mustafa Omer (in spite of his Ogadeni ethnicity) the SRS's support to Madobe has waned, in turn leading Madobe to lean more heavily on Kenya. In previous decades, historical concerns that the ethnic Somalis in the SRS were eager to re-align themselves with a greater Somalia drove Ethiopia's efforts to keep Somalia weak and divided.

ERITREA

AN ANTAGONISTIC PAST

Eritrea has been accused historically of supporting armed groups in Somali, fuelling violence and contributing to instability. In 2009, the UN imposed an arms embargo in response to these claims and in connection with clashes with Djibouti. Accompanying the thawing of relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia when Abiy Ahmed assumed the role of Prime Minister in 2018, the UN lifted these sanctions, in the absence of evidence that Eritrea was still supporting AS. In fact, the FGS and the Ethiopian government were among those advocating for the lifting of the sanctions on Eritrea.²⁰⁷

Before the sanctions were imposed, in 2007, President Afwerki withdrew Eritrea's membership from IGAD, which at the time it saw as a "an extension of the Ethiopian foreign ministry", suspecting that IGAD had used the UN sanctions threat as a tool to further isolate Eritrea.²⁰⁸ Eritrea formally rejoined IGAD in 2011, but in more recent years Afwerki's tripartite alliance with Abiy and Farmajo has become its primary channel for engagement with Somalia and, as noted in the next section, is seen to have undercut IGAD's influence.

THE TRIPARTITE ALLIANCE

September 2018 saw the emergence of the tripartite alliance between Eritrea's, Ethiopia's, and Somalia's respective leaders. The relationship between the three leaders is said to be founded on their mutual opposition to federalism and desire for further centralisation of power; the accommodation of ethnonational diversity; and institutionalised governance: "Instead, they prefer a centralised state under the command of a strongman who rules by fiat."²⁰⁹ While some officials in Somalia and Ethiopia defended the arrangement as a legitimate partnership to support regional trade and cooperation, the alliance has been labelled an "aspirational axis of autocracy"²¹⁰ by the CRP and a "club of dictators" by its regional critics.²¹¹ An Ethiopian official defended the alliance, describing it as a "partnership between the three countries [which] is facilitating cooperation and trade among the neighbours" and should not be construed negatively.²¹² He argued that the agreement came about because of a "chemistry" between the three leaders and a shared experience of security challenges and external interference.²¹³

Initially, some observers greeted the news of the alliance, insofar as it was seen to signal an end to Ethiopian and Eritrean meddling in Somali domestic affairs and circumventing the federal government.²¹⁴

However, the alliance has since invited widespread misgivings among actors across the region and the international community on a variety of bases; it was described as being an opaque and “unwritten agreement, between two men, Abiy and Afwerki”, with Farmajo—and therefore Somalia—as the subordinate partner in the arrangement.²¹⁵ The alliance is viewed by its critics as undermining and paralysing IGAD as the primary Horn of Africa multilateral institution, as the three leaders circumvent it in their private negotiations. For Eritrea, which for many years has been considered a ‘pariah state’ and the enemy of many of its regional neighbours, the alliance presents an opportunity to regain regional influence. Through the alliance, Afwerki was hoping to become the “godfather” of the Horn, according to one regional diplomat.²¹⁶

Regional impacts of the alliance so far have been considerable. IGAD officials themselves privately noted that the alliance has eroded IGAD’s position in the region, as the three allied countries circumnavigate it in their closed-door negotiations. The alliance was also described as side-lining other regional players Kenya and Djibouti, and contradicting Ethiopia’s long history of pan-Africanism.²¹⁷ A Djiboutian official indicated that Afwerki had recently played a role in disrupting the relationship between the Djiboutian and Somali governments, who are long-running allies, remarking that, “The president of Eritrea is the most destabilising figure in the entire region, and he found a gullible leader in Farmajo and he exploited it. We never thought that a Somali leader can be weaponised against us, but it happened.”²¹⁸ The alliance was described by one source as being extremely detrimental to Ethiopia too, however, in that it had paved way for the infiltration of Eritrean intelligence operatives into the country at every level, beyond just the Tigrayan conflict, and further extended Afwerki’s sphere of influence into Ethiopia—its historical enemy. The source posed that Afwerki had used “the mind, muscle, and money of Abiy to balkanise his own country”.²¹⁹ Another regional diplomat similarly suggested that Abiy has become trapped in the relationship with Afwerki, because Afwerki has provided so much military support in his fight against the TPLF.²²⁰

The tripartite alliance is likely to be challenged by regional opposition, including from IGAD; from international concern about its role; and from the shifting political fortunes of both Abiy and Farmajo.²²¹ Meanwhile, interviewees judged that Eritrea’s principal contribution to the alliance would be the contribution of military expertise and capability, and other military and intelligence activities; and even that the initial motivation for the reported training of Somali youth since 2018 may have been to build a ‘multi-purpose force’ for use by the tripartite alliance’s leaders.²²²

Politically sensitive claims of the deployment of Somali troops to Tigray in support of Abiy have not been substantiated; but they have caused regional and international concern, as well as public criticism in Somalia,²²³ and were taken seriously by our interviewees. Media reports have estimated some 3,000–5,000 recruits were sent to Eritrea, although the source in this research estimated the numbers to be closer to 9,000–11,000. Eyewitness reports indicate that unknown numbers of these Somali troops in Eritrea have been deployed to Tigray since the conflict began in November 2020, under the control of Eritrean commanders—and that many have been killed.²²⁴ The truth about this issue remains unclear, and one source noted that the risk associated with their talking would likely keep it suppressed until after the federal elections.²²⁵

DJIBOUTI

'BROTHERHOOD' WITH SOMALIA

Djibouti is a very small but relatively stable country, hosting a heavy global military and commercial presence, situated in what could be described as a 'bad neighbourhood'—flanked by Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia, with Yemen's coast just some 30km away at its nearest point. Djibouti's position on Somalia is arguably the most consistent and non-controversial of the Horn countries; no doubt related to Djibouti President Ismail Guelleh, who has been in office since 1999 and is considered a regional 'strongman'. Djibouti's population has a large proportion of ethnic Somalis from the Issa clan, including Guelleh himself, which plays a significant role in the relationship. As such, a Djiboutian diplomat explained that Djibouti has a comparative advantage over other regional players in understanding the traditions of the Somalis.²²⁶ Broadly, both Djiboutian and Somali officials described the relationship as one of brothers.²²⁷ A Djiboutian government minister remarked that "Djibouti has only one policy on Somalia: to revive a strong, stable, and unified Somalia...We do so by supporting reconciliation and mediation efforts in Somalia, and by remaining a genuinely neutral partner among the Somali people."²²⁸

In particular, Djiboutian officials trace the early stages of that policy back to the 2000 Arta Conference on Somalia.²²⁹ Certainly, aspects of the Arta process live on in Somali politics today: Arta produced a power-sharing agreement and the declaration of the Transitional National Government in August 2000. The process also established the '4.5 formula' into Somali politics and revived the notion of a unitary, not federal, Somali state. However, the outcome failed to produce an operational government of national unity, facing numerous domestic opponents as well as Ethiopian hostility.²³⁰ Officials also pointed to Djibouti's contribution of troops to AMISOM forces in Somalia, based largely in the Hiran region, as further evidence of their commitment to Somali stability.²³¹

DISCORD WITH THE PRESIDENT

The relationship between the Guelleh government and the FGS under Farmajo has been more complex. Djiboutian government interviewees gave the impression that while their government supported the FGS in principle, its relationship with Farmajo specifically was troubled. It was not clear when the discord began, but a key element of the deteriorating relationship between Djibouti and Somalia is the tripartite agreement, which Djibouti perceives as a threat to its national security given its bitter border dispute with Eritrea. A number of Djiboutian officials said they felt that President Farmajo betrayed them by joining the tripartite alliance. As demonstration of the worsening relationship, on 17th September 2021, President Farmajo accused Djibouti of illegally detaining Fahad Yasin, his close ally and former NISA chief, who was sacked by Somali prime minister Mohamed Roble earlier in September. Yasin had initially travelled to Turkey after being sacked, but on his return journey to Mogadishu a few weeks later was briefly held in Djibouti.²³²

When asked about Farmajo's belief that the Djiboutian government favoured the opposition in Somalia, a Djiboutian government minister defended the Djiboutian position: "How can we be biased for an opposition, when we are the country with the most to lose from a weakened government in Mogadishu? We've always stood by the Somali people. But the Farmajo administration wanted us to disallow former presidents, prime ministers and ministers from visiting our country—something we will never do. Our country is open for all Somalis regardless of their political persuasion. Even Farmajo is welcome if he becomes an opposition leader after this election. That's Djibouti, we are open for all."²³³ A Djiboutian diplomat commented that the dispute came as a shock to them because they had never experienced a fallout with Mogadishu before, and that they were "currently assessing the approach" to Somalia: "I think we will refine our engagement to ensure that the row doesn't occur again."²³⁴

In light of the planned federal elections in Somalia and what Djibouti's relations with Mogadishu might look like beyond the elections, the same diplomat reflected, "We know politicians come and go in Somalia, so we won't be impacted by the moves of one leader. We are looking at the bigger picture, which is good."²³⁵ Regarding Djibouti's position towards Mogadishu after the elections, he added: "We expect the relationship to return to how it was four years ago."

We will work with whomever is elected. Unlike many countries, we don't have a preferred candidate or group. All Somalis are our brothers and sisters."²³⁶ A government minister similarly commented, "It depends on the outcome. But Djibouti is determined to keep the relationship strong. We won't be distracted by recent events, which we attribute to certain individuals and certain dynamics in the region. We have every reason to believe that things will improve."²³⁷

TRADE LINKAGES

Djibouti's relationship with Somalia is also underpinned by the robust trade linkages between the two countries. Djibouti has been described by the CRP as accommodating part of the "transnational business class and transnational conglomerates [that] have developed where transactions, financial services, and foreign exchange are located in foreign cities (Dubai, Djibouti, Nairobi), but where these businesses are heavily involved in domestic politics in order to protect assets and secure new opportunities".²³⁸ In particular, Djibouti hosts the Somali Business Council, Somalia's largest trade collective, which comprises members from almost all of Somalia's major businesses.²³⁹ In addition, a Djiboutian diplomat noted that Djibouti has helped to facilitate access to international banking systems for Somali business actors, because these international systems are largely inaccessible within Somalia due to international counter crime and terrorism restrictions.²⁴⁰ Djibouti presumably benefits financially from serving as a key hub or conduit for Somalia's trade with the rest of the world, and has apparently also given Somali businesses various concessions, including land to develop in Djibouti, and as a result, some of the largest Somali companies have relocated their global headquarters.²⁴¹

Djibouti's position as a major port and maritime hub has heavily shaped its relations with other Horn countries and other Red Sea/Gulf states. The Doraleh port, just outside of Djibouti's capital, was previously operated by the UAE's DP World, but was handed over to Chinese company China Merchants Holders in 2018. China also has a large military base in Djibouti, as do other world powers including the US, Saudi Arabia, France, Italy, Spain, and Japan. The narrow Bab-el-Mandeb strait marks the narrowest point of the Red Sea, between Djibouti and Yemen, and is therefore strategic for maritime access and military operations underway in Yemen.

Overall, 95% of Ethiopia's trade currently passes through the Doraleh port, which ties the two Horn countries together. However, an interviewee suggested that there has been a recent reduction in this trade volume because of Ethiopia's conflict in Tigray and the wider economic downturn.²⁴² Moreover, this reliance on Djibouti has also driven Ethiopia's interest in Somaliland's Berbera port development as an alternative trade route.²⁴³ In practical terms, Djibouti's port does appear to retain some commercial advantages over Berbera for Ethiopia and other countries in the region. Nevertheless, because Djibouti currently has strong linkages with key business actors in both Somalia and Somaliland, a shift in balance of trade between Doraleh and Berbera will likely negatively impact Djibouti's economy and affect its economic stances and relationships with political and business elites.²⁴⁴

Djibouti was among the founding member states of IGAD and has served as the multilateral bloc's headquarters since its inception in 1986. Recent developments in relations between other countries in the Horn—including the Kenya–Somalia maritime dispute—and the emergence of the tripartite alliance between Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia in 2018 have complicated Djibouti's position, both as a country and in relation to its role in IGAD. On the one hand, when Somalia severed diplomatic ties with Kenya and presented its complaints to IGAD in 2020, Djibouti was dragged into the dispute because Somalia rejected the IGAD fact-finding mission's conclusion: that there was not sufficient evidence to show that Kenya interfered in Somalia's internal affairs. Mogadishu subsequently accused Djibouti, and IGAD, of siding with Kenya²⁴⁵ which Djibouti strongly denies.²⁴⁶ At the same time, the tripartite alliance between Djibouti's three neighbours has served to politically isolate the country, and according to Djibouti officials interviewed, has created space for Afwerki to further disrupt Djibouti's relationship with Mogadishu.²⁴⁷ However, a Djiboutian diplomat was emphatic that Djibouti remained committed to making IGAD work in this turbulent context: "Djibouti is determined to keep IGAD strong and united... There's no doubt that the tripartite alliance has opened a crack within IGAD member states, but I think the foundation is very strong."²⁴⁸

SUDAN

A number of Sudanese and Somali experiences in recent decades shape their relationship and their respective positions vis-à-vis the Gulf countries. Following the oil boom in the 1970s, the Gulf economies not only overshadowed those of Sudan and Somalia, but in a sense also absorbed them. Trading companies set up in the Gulf states during the 1970s oil boom, owned and managed by Somalis and Sudanese, later emerged as major players in those countries' domestic economies. For instance, most Sudanese Islamic banks began in this manner, as well as the major Somali companies Dahabshiil and Indhadeero.²⁴⁹

According to a Sudanese former diplomat in Somalia, the 1990s saw a more active bilateral engagement between Sudan and Somalia, during the early years of Somalia's civil war and driven by the two countries' respective confrontations with the US at the time. He reflected that in Somalia, General Aideed's 1993 battles with American forces in Mogadishu (the infamous Blackhawk Down incident) coincided with the US adding Sudan to its 'state sponsors of terrorism' list and imposition of sanctions. The then president of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir, apparently saw Aideed as a strong leader to support in this context, and provided weapons, training and financial support to Aideed in his struggle with the US.²⁵⁰

In 2006, Sudan led a mediation process between Somalia's Transitional Federal Government and the Union of Islamic courts. A Sudanese former diplomat in Somalia recounted that "Sudan was the only country that maintained an excellent relationship between the leadership of the UIC—most of whom studied in Sudan—and Ethiopia, the biggest backer of the TFG at the time. So we used our good offices to mediate with the genuine intention to find a lasting solution [in Somalia]."²⁵¹ He elaborated that some elements within the UIC—the Salafi ones—were unwilling to compromise, apparently buoyed by the vast swathes of land they controlled at the time. Meanwhile, the more moderate Islamists, led by Sheikh Sharif, were more conciliatory and willing to settle, but Sharif "couldn't tame his colleagues within the UIC". Ultimately, the talks failed and led to the invasion of Somalia by Ethiopia between 2006 and 2009.²⁵²

More recently during Farmajo's tenure, al-Bashir apparently tried to deepen ties with Somalia, proposing the establishment of an economic cooperation council in the Horn of Africa based in Khartoum, with Somalia and Sudan as its founding members. However, Farmajo was not receptive to the idea, presumably because he felt that cooperating with Sudan in the economic sphere carried too many reputational risks given Sudan's international sanctions.²⁵³ Generally speaking, Sudan's interests in Somalia are also informed by its relations with other countries in the region. The Somali former diplomat to Sudan argued that Sudan's position differs to the majority of other regional players, in that Sudan sees Somalia as having potential leverage against "troublesome neighbours" such as Ethiopia and Kenya, and therefore wishes to support a strong Somalia.²⁵⁴

Both Sudanese and Somali interviewees commented on the considerable shift in 'Somalia policy' between al-Bashir, who was deposed in April 2019, and Abdalla Hamdok, who has served as prime minister since August 2019. According to a Somali former diplomat in Sudan, "the nature of the relationship couldn't have been different [between the two leaders]. During al-Bashir's tenure, the interviewee explained that "Somalia was at the top of the agenda, as al-Bashir's Islamist government saw Somalia as a regional ally and potential proxy...It's true that al-Bashir was preferring Somali governments led by Islamists, but in fact he also worked very pragmatically with others."²⁵⁵ Under Hamdok, the diplomat posed, "It appears that Hamdok is very much disinterested in Somalia, maybe because of the many competing priorities at the domestic front, and the Renaissance Dam, which is taking up most of this diplomatic bandwidth."²⁵⁶ Another former diplomat suggested that Hamdok's swinging away from Somalia may be partly due to his secularist orientation which places less emphasis on relationships with other Islamic states.²⁵⁷ Incidentally, in November 2019, Prime Minister Hamdok was appointed to the position of Chair of IGAD, replacing Abiy Ahmed; the appointment was viewed as a means of side-stepping existing tensions between Kenya, Djibouti, and Somalia.²⁵⁸

In the background, a former diplomat explained that Sudan and Somalia have a shared historical cultural and religious affiliation, which led Sudan to initiate its scholarship programme for Somali students, who were brought to Sudan to for higher education; and paved the way for relationship building with other Somali warlords aside from Aideed, in order to develop a “sustainable link” between the two countries.²⁵⁹ In the years since, the scholarship programme has remained a key component of Sudan’s relations with Somalia, which was said to have benefitted some 6000 Somali students. A former Somali diplomat in Sudan remarked that “There are now associations of Sudan graduates all across Somalia. And some of these graduates... held very senior positions in the government.”²⁶⁰ He observed that many Somali graduates from Sudanese universities return to Somalia and “establish themselves in the private and public sectors in ways that no other group has been able to establish”.²⁶¹ He argued that this has built a robust and durable relationship between Sudan and Somalia, with the Somali graduates of Sudan advocating for the relationship back home.²⁶² A Sudanese diplomat similarly noted that many of the graduates are now in leadership positions across Somalia.²⁶³ At the same time, it was also noted by another regional diplomat that Sudan has a sizeable Somali diaspora population itself, further supporting the bilateral linkages.²⁶⁴ In addition, Sudan has provided some security training support to Somalia. Sudan was said to train a few hundred senior Somali police and intelligence officers every year, at elite colleges in Sudan, as part of a wider effort by Sudan to “win the heart and minds” in Somalia.²⁶⁵

EGYPT

In an interview, a former diplomat to Egypt stated that Egypt’s foreign policy across the Horn is primarily dominated by the Nile.²⁶⁶ Indeed, Egypt’s interests in Somalia over the past several decades appear to be informed almost entirely by its competition with Ethiopia, seeking to gain leverage with Somalia and other Horn countries in the Egypt–Ethiopia rivalry over Nile water. As far back as the 1960s and ’70s, Egypt was said to have invested in Somalia as a means to isolate Ethiopia.²⁶⁷ In 1997, Egypt convened the Cairo Conference on Somalia, which in part sought to provide a platform for Somali warring factions who had boycotted the earlier Sodere talks convened by Ethiopia. According to Ken Menkhous, the two broad coalitions that emerged from Cairo and Sodere formed the basis for the

main political divisions in Somalia in subsequent years.²⁶⁸ In later years, the Grand Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Nile in Ethiopia has animated this rivalry, as Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan compete over the usage and control of the Nile waters. In a wider context, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has apparently visited countries throughout the Horn seeking to develop strategic military agreements with these countries—Somalia is just one player in its regional calculations against Ethiopia.²⁶⁹

Regarding contemporary Somali politics, Egypt is believed to play a back-seat role. According to one former diplomat, it has been speculated that in the 2017 elections, Egypt supported Farmajo’s bid with 2–3 million USD; if this is the case, Egypt’s efforts were unfruitful, given Farmajo’s current closeness to Ethiopia. Besides Farmajo, the interviewee surmised that Egypt may look for other ‘pet politicians’ or military actors in Somalia to engage with, in its efforts to win ground against Ethiopia.²⁷⁰ Meanwhile, in the upcoming federal elections, the interviewee further speculated that Ethiopia may support Farmajo’s re-election bid because he could be a useful ally against Egypt.²⁷¹

Like Sudan and other countries, Egypt has in the past provided scholarships for Somali students to study in Egypt, and this may have ensured some lasting relationships between Egypt and Somalia’s political elites today. More broadly, the shared Sufi ideological base in Egypt and Somalia was said to have supported the relationship.²⁷² On the other hand, Egypt was believed to have not been as successful in making use of these links in Somalia as other countries—namely Turkey. It was suggested that Turkey’s growing footprint in Somalia since 2011, and the various opportunities that this has offered to Somalis, has served to push Egypt out of this space and limited its foothold for the last decade.²⁷³

4 SOMALI INTERNAL INTERESTS AND DYNAMICS

Somali actors are not just passive recipients or victims of the interventions and involvement of external players in the region. Rather, the relationships that have emerged between Somalia and external states are two-way and shaped equally by the political, economic, historical, and socio-cultural realities within contemporary Somalia and the interests and strategies of its elite actors.

4.1 EXTRAVERSION AND THE POLITICAL MARKETPLACE

The CRP describes Somalia—and other countries in the Horn—as being a “political marketplace”.²⁷⁴ Political marketplaces are characterised by the dominance of transactional politics over formal institutions; widespread violence of different kinds; a subordinate position in the world economic order; system turbulence; and short-term unpredictability. In the case of Somalia, it is argued that the evolution of political marketplace can be traced back to Siad Barre’s dysfunctional ‘kleptocracy’, and subsequently through periods of extreme deregulation. In particular, Somalia’s experience since the Barre regime has produced a tendency of ‘extraversion’, whereby Somali elites have been drawn into globalised power systems as a tactic for their political and economic survival.²⁷⁵

Combined, the literature review and the primary data for this research identify several key thematic areas in which the political marketplace and extraverted relations play out most evidently within Somalia, and which, by extension, make Somalia particularly susceptible to external involvement or interference. These included political financing and the lack of institutionalisation; the nature of the country’s commercial sector; the prevalence of aid and development assistance; the Somali transnational diaspora and relatedly, Islamic business linkages; and the tendency for regionalised conflict dynamics in the Horn.

Political financing and the lack of formal institutionalisation

All of the relevant external powers involved in Somalia have used political financing, especially during election periods, to support a range of incumbents and aspirants. The fact that presidential

contenders with the backing of one or more Gulf states have won in the last two elections is a sign that for Somali political actors, put simply, this system works for them and they are able to use it to their advantage. Menkhaus outlines that because Somalia holds indirect elections undertaken by electoral colleges, the outcome can be more easily manipulated by Somali elites. Menkhaus adds, “External actors continue to play out rivalries in Somalia and back different Somali politicians and factions. But far from undermining the elite bargain, this aspect of international politics has been an important part of it. It has provided different Somali political factions access to cash and other benefits.”²⁷⁶ Somali interviewees were explicit about this pattern of engagement among the FGS and FMS leadership: “Both regional countries and the Gulf cooperate with certain elites who benefit from their financial largesse or political support.”²⁷⁷

Relatedly, a lack of robust institutionalisation in Somalia has fostered these dynamics. Menkhaus notes that “The government provides almost no services and is not strong enough to effectively regulate much more muscular private sector interests.”²⁷⁸ In fact, the CRP argues that it has been of benefit to many Somali actors to ensure that this remains the status quo, especially when seeking external support—formal institutions “rarely constrain the actual conduct of politics. Instead, formal institutions are often used by elites to mediate relationships with external actors.”²⁷⁹ To be more specific, many of the arrangements for foreign investment are not always subject to oversight or competitive bidding, or publication.²⁸⁰

The commercial sector

This tendency is highly evident in Somalia's commercial and trade sectors. For example, regarding Somalia's *miraa* trade with its neighbours, Farmajo was said to have been able to exploit the informality of the sector in order to strengthen his ties with Ethiopia—at the expense of Kenya. We noted above (p. 30) the Kenyan diplomat's concern that Farmajo's mismanagement of the *miraa* trade had politicised regional trade more broadly.²⁸¹

In the context of this research and regional dynamics, Somalia's ports are highly significant, in that they remain the primary source of external revenue for the central government and non-state actors. Revenue collection amounts vary considerably between the four major ports: 2016 figures highlight that Berbera generates the highest revenue, at \$150 million; followed by Mogadishu (\$80 million); Bossaso (\$23 million); and Kismayo (\$4.5 million)²⁸²—and figures today are likely to be considerably higher overall. Tax revenue at Mogadishu seaport has grown rapidly following the Turkish investment, which has resulted in the incorporation of the port into global container shipping systems. Meanwhile, AS exerts control over revenues in Mogadishu and Kismayo. The Mogadishu business community reports Al-Shabab infiltration of Mogadishu port logs, accessing data held by commercial shipping agents, and demanding "taxation" payments from businesses who import goods.²⁸³

Looking forward, Somalia's potential/developing oil and gas sector may open up new opportunities for political and financial gain for Somali actors. A CRP memo by Joakim Gundel highlights the underlying dynamics behind the developments and the push for—arguably premature—auctioning, suggesting that "Speculation is feeding the political marketplace in Somalia; speculation in future oil wealth (in the short-term through foreign oil companies that are willing to pay access fees, rents, and other inducements up front)...These drivers are elevated in the current pre-election period, where potential unconditional cash injections and the political trading around key positions—and the control or influence of contracts—in the emerging 'institutions' are important dynamics." A central goal here for Somali actors, in order to secure benefit from the sector, will be to ensure that one's 'own people' are firmly in control of all the key posts that control and regulate oil exploration licensing and production agreements.²⁸⁴

Aid and development

Humanitarian aid and development assistance from external states in Somalia may have also played a role in perpetuating a certain set of interests among Somali actors. Menkhaus notes that foreign aid "has provided ample incentive to elites to stay in the game...if aid levels drop, this will increase elite competition over remaining resources and reduce the costs of defection [from the government]."²⁸⁵ In this context, international state-building and stabilisation partners are implicated in the political marketplace dynamic. As Hagmann has reflected, "External recognition bestowed on particular domestic political actors, policy processes, or institutions has fuelled competition between and among local and national elites...The dysfunctional effects of internationalised state building in south-central Somalia are the result of both external and elite Somali agendas."²⁸⁶

The Somali diaspora and Islamic business linkages

The protracted nature of conflict in Somalia has produced a vast transnational diaspora in almost all of the external countries featured in this research, such that most of the political and business elite in Somalia hold residency or citizenship rights in a second country.²⁸⁷ The CRP explains that over time, "A transnational business class and transnational conglomerates have developed where transactions, financial services, and foreign exchange are located in foreign cities (Dubai, Djibouti, Nairobi) but where these businesses are heavily involved in domestic politics in order to protect assets and secure new opportunities." The CRP adds that "The actions and interest of this transnational business network has been informed by the legacy of state predation and violent conflict—that skewed economic opportunities and damaged commercial networks; with losses of trust; and political and economic uncertainty—whereby businesses have relied on external intermediaries and personal and social networks."²⁸⁸ In practice, this produces a private sector wherein businesses cope with containing cost and risk by stashing wealth abroad and by avoiding growth "in order to circumvent the attention of governance providers and armed actors, who may wish to extract or assume a stake in an expanding business".²⁸⁹ Ultimately, this contributes to a landscape of political and financial opacity and capital flight in Somalia.

The expansion of an internationalised Islamic business identity may also have helped to facilitate Somalia's externalised political/business environment. As the CRP observes, "Islamic identity and norms play a crucial role in economic life and have in part been intensified by the need to overcome the more divisive, competitive aspects of the clan system. A more overt Islamic identity in business has played an important role in developing and extending business relations into the Gulf, which has accelerated over the last 10–20 years. Engendering trust is a major aspect of this shift and, furthermore, is associated with a more conservative interpretation of Islam, where the influence of Salafist networks has become more pervasive in economic life."²⁹⁰ When considering this analysis against the findings of this research, which is that ideology is arguably *not* the dominant factor driving contemporary Somalia–Gulf relations, the conclusion might be that different identities—religious, political, clan, or otherwise—are mobilised at different times according to the pragmatic sense of what garners greatest favour.

Regionalised conflict dynamics

The threat of Al-Shabab in Somalia in particular has invited the involvement of external actors into Somalia's affairs while helping to maintain a certain form of domestic status quo. As Menkhaus notes, "Al-Shabab has provided the glue that has helped keep the Somali elite bargain intact since 2007. Were Al-Shabab to be considerably weakened or defeated, or were the FGS and Al-Shabab to reach a negotiated end to the insurgency, the elite compact might come undone, and even lead to renewed level of elite manipulated clan war. To the extent that Al-Shabab's presence is an important factor in the amount of external assistance Somalia receives, the group's demise could also lead to a shrinkage of foreign aid, which could also strain the elite bargain."²⁹¹ Hagmann summed up the overall impact of this on Somalia's domestic security arena: "Counterinsurgency and the expansion of the federal government's territorial presence is thus—with the exception of some government-affiliated Somali militias—predominantly shouldered by foreigners. That is, fought by African neighbours and assisted by foreign security firms and Western counterterrorism specialists."²⁹²

Historically a western diplomat told us that Somalia's failure to formally recognise current borders was a factor in the Horn's regionalised conflict dynamics.²⁹³ In the past, this has fed into irredentist movements or fears of irredentist movements among its neighbours and been a key factor in both Kenya and Ethiopia's military activities in Somalia.²⁹⁴ A more contemporary development in regionalised conflict dynamics has been the tripartite alliance. The tripartite alliance highlights the way in which Somalia (and other countries) have been able to forum-shop among other countries in the region in order to influence political and conflict dynamics domestically. In the case of Farmajo, a regional diplomat argued that his primary reasons for entering into the agreement were because he was looking for a means to insulate himself against Gulf rivalries, in order to gain political support in the diplomatic fallout with Kenya. Separately, it was noted that, by enabling tripartite military support under the presidents' control²⁹⁵, the alliance compensated Farmajo to some extent for his lack of "a clan large or well-armed enough to provide him with a sizable and durable base of armed support".²⁹⁶

Upcoming Federal Elections

Somalia's troubled and much-delayed federal elections are currently scheduled for November 2021 and will certainly be considerably delayed (at the time of writing, October 2021), inviting considerable speculation on what the outcome might be and what this will mean for the external powers who anchor their relationships with the presidential incumbent and the current constellation of other influential political actors in the country. The majority of interviewees in this research, due to their positions within government and the sensitivity of the subject, were hesitant to speak openly about their prognosis for the upcoming elections.

It was pointed out that in the last three presidential elections and in a number of sub-national elections, Gulf countries were believed to have provided political financing to key candidates.²⁹⁷ In fact, a Mogadishu-based official provided an example of where Somali elites have in fact 'played' their external patrons in order to gain short-term support—which counters the typical assumption that it is the external players that instrumentalise the Somali elites. The official recounted that in the 2016 elections, a Gulf country paid a huge sum to presidents of all five Federal Member States to support the candidacy of a major candidate, who ultimately lost.



“Only one of the five states actually supported that candidate. It was a classic case of opportunism.”²⁹⁸ One interviewee from Mogadishu suggested that in the February 2021 episode in which Farmajo attempted to extend his term limit by two years, some external actors were supporting this bid, while others were supporting the opposition who were resisting it.²⁹⁹

Image credit: ©AMISOM



As has been discussed in previous sections, the UAE and Qatar—and to some extent Ethiopia and other external countries—have all been criticised for interference in elections and now face considerable reputational risks and international pressure—especially from the US—with regard to the upcoming elections. As such, these countries may well calculate that a reduced or at least more discreet approach to political support for particular candidates might be preferable. Given Somalia’s aforementioned anti-incumbency tendency, among other political factors, it is certainly plausible that Farmajo will not win re-election, which is likely to significantly recalibrate the ‘chess board’ with regard to external support to the FGS. In particular, the sacking of Farmajo ally Fahad Yasin, the broker of the Mogadishu–Doha relationship, might negatively impact Farmajo’s chances of re-election.³⁰⁰ For countries such as Ethiopia and Eritrea, which ostensibly support Farmajo, their positions in the country may shift following the elections in the event that Farmajo does not win. Indeed, it was also speculated by a regional diplomat that if Farmajo loses the election, Somalia’s will lose its ‘hook’ with Eritrea and Ethiopia, and its role in the tripartite alliance will crumble.³⁰¹ Turkey and Djibouti, which tend to remain a step removed from the presidential leadership politics, are most likely to remain more consistent in their approach to the FGS regardless of the election outcome. Regarding the UAE meanwhile, an interviewee in the UAE posed that the Emirati government is banking on a change in president and an improvement in their relationship with the FGS.³⁰²

4.2 AREAS OF CONSENSUS AMONG SOMALIA ACTORS

Importantly for the sake of this research, a key finding that emerged from the primary data was that—arguably surprisingly—there was a lot more consensus among Somali actors about the nature of external interests and involvement in the country than there was disagreement, including those in ostensibly opposing FGS and FMS camps, and on issues that one might expect to be more polarising.

Perspectives on external players

Some interviewees made broad statements regarding all of the key external players in the Horn and Middle East. An official from the Jubbaland FMS commented that “They [all] see Somalia as their playground unfortunately.”³⁰³ An official from the FGS likewise remarked broadly that “Even if they mask their role in humanitarian and other goodwill intentions, the fact is that they’re pursuing their national interests in ways they’ve calculated. This is true for *all* external actors.”³⁰⁴

When asked about particular countries, it was remarkable how similar the responses were across the board. Generally speaking, Turkey was the most highly commended, on the basis of its strong trade relations in Somalia and because it has avoided interference in domestic politics and provision of political financing to individual actors. After Turkey, Djibouti was widely praised, again for its support to Somali trade, its avoidance of using political financing, and the sense of shared ‘brotherhood’ between the two countries. The coherence and consistency of the ‘Somalia policy’ from both Turkey and Djibouti was also noted positively. On the other hand, the Gulf countries—both Qatar and the UAE—and Kenya and Ethiopia were more faulted for their use of political financing or support to armed groups, for their weak trade relations with Somalia, or more broadly for inconsistent ‘Somalia policies’.

Comments to this effect were numerous. An FGS official reflected that “Countries who have a reputation for getting involved in the domestic political affairs of Somalia tend to bear negative influence in the country. And the list is sadly long, including Ethiopia, Kenya, Qatar, and UAE. Countries who avoid getting involved in the domestic politics tend to bear positive influence...Ultimately, that’s the defining line.”³⁰⁵

Another FGS official corroborated: “All neighbouring countries—except Djibouti—and Gulf states are seen in an extremely negative light due to their inherently transactionalist posture. Turkey, on the other hand, is viewed positively, because it packages its interests in ways that plays well among the elite and even the public.”³⁰⁶ A Puntland FMS official remarked: “Turkey is a notable exception. The rest are here to do their dirty work. We know that much, and sometimes we are tolerating them for other reasons—because they’re more powerful than us and can harm us in a big way.”³⁰⁷ The official elaborated that “Turkey is the one country that seems to have a coherent agenda and has managed to achieve it with very little problems domestically. That is because they generally avoid domestic politics and are doing tangible things inside Somalia. The only problem with them is that they’re Mogadishu-focused.” Regarding Qatar he commented: “They’re bad for Somalia because we have zero trade with them, and they’re always involved in our domestic politics in a way that deepens conflicts and competition.” Speaking of the UAE, he provided a slightly different stance to Mogadishu, though it was consistent in its praise of eternal trade investment as a predicator of positive relations: “It depends on whom you ask. But from a Puntland perspective, we’ve an excellent relationship with them mainly through their anti-piracy mission in our state. We also do lots of trade with UAE.”³⁰⁸

A Jubbaland FMS minister explained that Somalia elites are highly aware of the types of behaviour to be expected from each of the external players, and therefore deliberately court whichever player they expect will provide them with the kind of involvement that they need. He expounded that “Each country has a reputation and, based on that, Somalis deal with them. Gulf countries have a reputation of bribing officials and as a result, elites expect money from them all the time. Turkey has a reputation of providing support to institutions and that’s what elites talk to them about. Ethiopia has a reputation of arming different groups or strong-arming political actors and that’s what people seek from them when they engage.”³⁰⁹

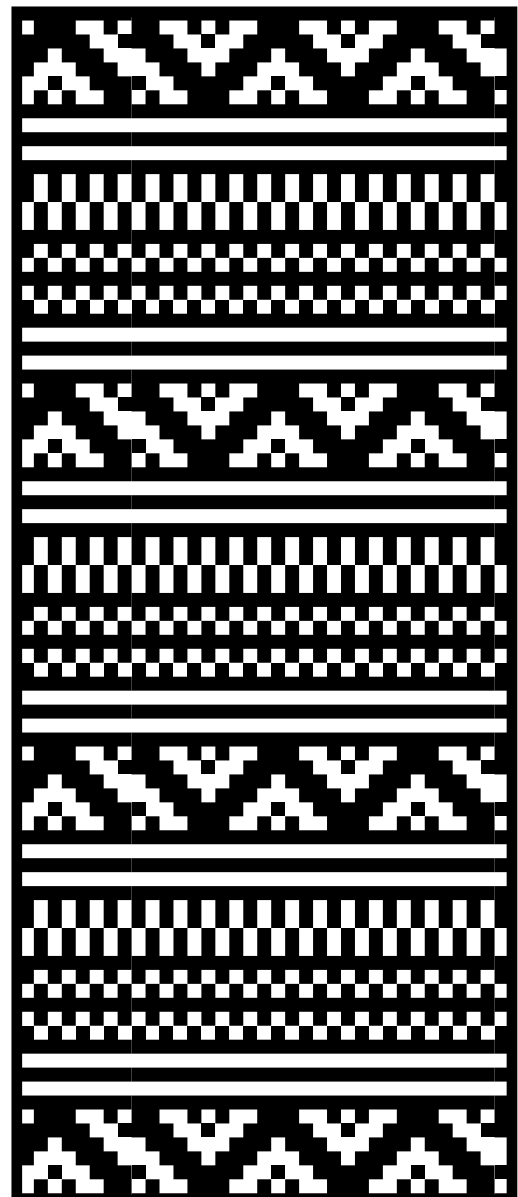
Transactionalism versus ideology

As discussed in previous sections, it is often assumed that Islamist ideology—or opposition to it—is a significant factor in shaping the interests and involvement of key external players within Somalia—namely the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, particularly in the wake of the 2017 Gulf crisis. Hagmann has written that “Spiritual and religious beliefs have also been appropriated from Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Egypt and Sudan by a new Salafi business elite, whose ascendancy in Somali politics has reconfigured the political settlement over the past 15 or so years.”³¹⁰

For each of these external countries, their respective positions in regard to Islamist ideology and its role within their Somali engagements is arguably overstated. Interviews with Somali actors from the FGS and FMSs in this research would indicate that mutual transactionalism and political and financial opportunism—often on the basis of short-term calculations—are far more dominant in informing these relationships. An FGS minister remarked: “I’d say that the influence of external actors is driven by us—the Somali political elite who are engaging these countries and inviting them to Somalia. So, one can say that it’s we against us! And these countries go along as long as their interests are taken care by their Somali ally.”³¹¹ An FGS minister commented, “There’s not much of an ideology to speak of. The whole thing is driven by opportunism, on both sides of course.”³¹² Another stated: “Ideology plays no role in these complex situations. It’s all about transactions.”³¹³ Comments from interviewees in the FMSs were strikingly similar to those of FGS actors. A Puntland official commented: “Somali actors know that foreign actors are using them so they’re also besting them at their own game by also using them, mostly for financial resources and political capital.”³¹⁴ A Jubbaland minister likewise noted: “It’s less about being bought and more about using each other.”³¹⁵

Somalia’s ability to manage competing interests

Another area of strong consensus among Somali interviewees on this subject, was the inability of the Somali government to manage these competing or pernicious external influences. A senior FGS official posed that managing external interests “is...an extraordinarily complex task. We are pulled in different directions all the time.”³¹⁶ Another FGS official agreed, “Over the past few years, our government has tried, with some success, to stem the negative influence of regional and Gulf countries. But the fact is that the Somali state is still very weak and is unable to limit the external influence.”³¹⁷ A Jubbaland minister was especially cynical: “The Somali government can barely manage competing domestic interests, let alone external ones.”³¹⁸



5 POTENTIAL PLATFORMS AND ENTRY POINTS TO HELP IMPROVE REGIONAL RELATIONS

On the basis of the literature review and primary data collection, the second half of this report identifies possible 'light-touch' interventions to the collective management of external engagements in Somalia—to optimise the political, social, and economic benefits for Somalia and its partners. Analysis of the data above suggests a set of overall 'guiding principles' which might shape such interventions, as follows:

- Any fresh intervention must take into account that each of Somalia's partners is responding to critical self-interests; and that each partner is perceived differently in Somalia. Their interests loom large in the minds of Somali decision-takers, at least as regards day-to-day tactical decision-taking, alongside the international community's long-term strategic engagement (about which we heard little in our interviews).
- Interviews with senior Somalis highlighted more consensus about external involvement than divergence, even between ostensibly opposing camps in the FGS and FMSs. The ideological divergence associated with the Gulf dispute is not reflected within Somalia or the other Horn countries. Nonetheless, on occasion, existing multilateral arrangements have been trumped by informal, high-level political understandings in the region. Any fresh intervention must identify and work with the shared Somali interest and seek to ensure maximum Somali commitment.
- There is a strong correlation between bilateral trade levels and political relations—and access to ports is a particularly sensitive issue. One regional diplomat noted to us: "Ports need to be treated as complementary not competitive. More cooperation and capacity sharing is needed."³¹⁹ Further, there is a positive track record of 'soft power' approaches, such as trade assistance and scholarship programmes, in building positive and stable relationships between Somalia and external countries. In principle, any fresh initiative should be crafted accordingly.
- In the Horn, a range of concerns exist with relation to the shared porous or disputed borders between Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya, including but not limited to: lingering historical fears of irridentism; Al-Shabab activities; and the anticipated large flows of refugees from Ethiopia's Tigray conflict and other points of regional instability. Positive impact on these border issues will be of significant benefit to future initiatives and will potentially ease long-term political pressures.
- There is a large Somali diaspora community across the Gulf/Middle Eastern and Horn countries. In many cases, they belong to the political and business elite which has a 'foot' in Somalia and in one or more other countries, with a degree of influence in each. In Somalia's neighbours, transboundary ethnic Somali communities similarly play influential roles in the high-level 'Somalia policy' of those countries and in other realms, including business and public discourse, albeit to varying extents. The ability to engage these points of influence will be an advantage in any future initiative.
- There are a number of international forums available to support in the region, into which regional powers have invested resources or political capital. By definition, these have had limited success so far in managing these complex, wide-reaching, and competing relations, whether in Somalia or in comparable contexts in the region; but an ability to harness and support them will be a positive aspect of any future proposals.
- Within a majority of the external countries—especially the Gulf countries, Turkey, Ethiopia Djibouti, and Eritrea—broadly speaking, there is a limited independent or vibrant civil society. The reach of the state in many of these countries is extensive, with think-tanks, universities, and other institutions having state-backing or being state-affiliated in some way. This has implications for whoever constitutes a 'track 1.5 or 'track 2' diplomacy actor in this environment.

In the majority of contemporary peace processes around the world, track 1 remains the most dominant form of diplomacy, however, we also see 'track 1.5', 'track 2', and 'track 3' approaches increasingly incorporated. Overall, the Centre for Human Dialogue suggests that multitrack diplomacy is seen as being able to build more a more sustainable peace, by bringing in other parts of society who are better positioned to make middle- and long-term contributions. Track 1.5 dialogues are conversations that include a mix of government officials—who participate in an unofficial capacity—and non-governmental experts, all sitting around the same table. Track 2 processes feature only civil society actors and other key stakeholders or experts, but with no governmental representation. According to USIP, "In an increasingly complex global environment, peacebuilders and diplomats looking to address difficult policy challenges are increasingly incorporating track 1.5 and track 2 dialogues—often referred to as "back channel" diplomacy—into their strategies". Track 3 refers to grassroots-level peacebuilding initiatives – which, in the context of this research project, we take as referring to cross-border community peacebuilding initiatives. Linkages – that is, 'hooking' a track 1.5, 2 or 3 initiatives to formal track 1 diplomacy – between these different tracks of diplomacy are equally key. Linkages can foster information-sharing, consensus-building or increased ownership.

The following sections offer five work areas through which the Somali authorities and the international community might reinforce the conduct of Somalia's multiple external relationships, so as to minimise their contribution to competition or conflict; optimise their positive impact on Somalia's resilience, development and security; and strengthen its role in the regional and international community. These proposals each relate to one or more of the 'motivations' identified in the research; as well as reflecting the 'principles' set out immediately above.

The report does not seek to prescribe the mechanics by which such approaches might be implemented. But we note that:

- implementation might be facilitated by administrative and specialist resource, to enable the design and implementation of concrete programmes; and
- that this resource might operate from one or more bodies commanding the broad trust of regional and Gulf players as well as of the Somalis; and be able to maintain focus on the development of a Somalia as a coherent neighbour and a force for peace and prosperity in the region.

Where relevant, this discussion will draw upon lessons learned from comparable initiatives elsewhere. Broadly speaking, the recommendations apply a multi-track approach to diplomacy, closely tailored to the particular context of Somalia and its external players.

Each section will then offer a set of tailored recommendations for international donors and policy makers for initiatives or spaces in which to directly and constructively engage.

The recommendations provided operate at different levels or 'tracks' and should be considered as overlapping, highly interlinked, and mutually reinforcing. That being said, the context within Somalia and the wider region at present is extremely turbulent; Somalia is facing federal elections and many of the other countries in the region are wracked by conflict, instability, or volatility, and so it is difficult to be highly predictive or prescriptive about how exactly these dynamics should be engaged with in the months and years to come. As such, the recommendations offered should be read as a 'menu' of potential options, contingent on both the unfolding political context and on the eventual shape and scope of donor interests and capacities looking forward. In any case, consideration could be made by international donors and policymakers as to whether a single donor instrument, such as a multi-spoke technical facility, could be developed in order to implement the below described recommendations. In such a case, the facility could provide facilitation, logistical support, and thematically relevant technical guidance—for example, on maritime cooperation, border management, conflict sensitivity, and trade support—to the recommendations described below.

SUPPORTING REGIONAL PLATFORMS FOR MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY

MULTILATERAL PEACE AND SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN THE REGION

The Horn of Africa and Gulf countries play host to multiple different and overlapping peace and security architectures which, in principle, hold the potential to serve as forums for multilateral engagement between the relevant powers in this research. On the African side is the African Union and IGAD; the Gulf states meanwhile have the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The Arab League straddles countries across northern Africa and the Middle East. Most recently, the Red Sea Council (RSC) was formed among Red Sea littoral states. Analysis of conflict data from the Horn and Red Sea region would indicate that conflict has become increasingly regionalised in recent decades—not only with regard to Somalia. Before the RSC was formed in early 2021 (which is still not fully operational), the CRP posited that: “One of the striking features of the HoA/Red Sea region is the lack of a consensual security community. Thus, it not only means that the mechanisms for resolving conflicts within the region are weak (notably IGAD)... but there is an enduring threat to national and regional ownership of the region’s agenda. Powers outside the region (e.g., the P5 at the UN Security Council or the GCC) can take political decisions with major repercussions for the Red Sea including the HoA, without the interests of the region in mind. There is a pressing need for a wider multilateralism (a collective security mechanism involving not just the states of the region but those in adjoining regions) and a deeper multilateralism (involving security, economic, governance and democracy agendas).”³²⁰

The same analysis argues that there lies an important normative value in the existence of such peace and security architecture, in providing space and opportunities for the conduct of formal interstate meetings in parallel with informal discussions: “African interstate organisations cannot be junior versions of the UN or OECD: their value lies precisely in the manner in which they provide a forum and norms that allow for informal political bargaining to be brought into alignment with the formal institutions and principles of the Pax Africana.”³²¹

However, resource and political constraints limit the capacity of these bodies to achieve progress between their member states and coordination with each other.³²² This hinders their capacity meaningfully to manage or mediate conflicts in the region and poses difficulties for other external partners and the traditional donors to engage with or support them in some cases. Certainly, interviewees in this research, including regional diplomats, were explicit about these challenges, with one arguing that “All multilateral institutions are currently paralysed, or too weak in this region.”³²³

Nonetheless, some potential entry points or opportunities do exist for donor instruments or diplomatic bodies to support these platforms in their efforts to optimise relations between Somalia and its external partners.

IGAD

IGAD is an eight-country trade bloc in eastern Africa, founded in 1996. IGAD succeeded the earlier Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD), a multinational body founded in 1986. IGAD’s membership today covers all of the key Horn states within the scope of this research—Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, and South Sudan—with the exceptions of Egypt and Eritrea—and thus represents an important forum in this space.

Within Somalia specifically, a senior IGAD official explained that IGAD’s activities largely consist of technical support, including to FGS state-building efforts, through technical and policy support to local governance; strategic planning; and drought and disaster management, as well as other environmental issues. Support is often provided in the form of experts embedded in key Somali line ministries and agencies.³²⁴ On the other hand, Somalia has not yet held a key role within the IGAD leadership. A regional diplomat suggested that if Somalia was given the chairmanship, or executive secretary position in IGAD, the country might have greater sense of investment in the bloc, which could be beneficial.³²⁵

However, a range of issues among IGAD’s member states impede its capacity for constructive engagement within Somalia internally and between Somalia and other relevant member states.

A senior academic in the region noted that IGAD relies on the political will of the region's leaders, and that this made it vulnerable to their rivalries or self-interested agendas. He argued that IGAD was stronger when there were more 'strongmen' leaders in the member states, like President Moi in Kenya. He commented that "IGAD needs to get its house in order" and that it is "the sum of strength of the key regional leaders". Until recently, Kenya and Ethiopia held the dominant positions in the leadership of dominated IGAD for about 10 years. Both Uganda and Somalia have vied for the Executive Secretary role in IGAD but have so far failed.³²⁶ An academic in the region suggested that IGAD only really holds leverage within the war in South Sudan.³²⁷

Indeed, Ethiopia's role in IGAD over the years has been extremely decisive in the institution's capacity to act. Before Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to office in 2018, Ethiopia played a pivotal role in IGAD—to the extent that IGAD had long been described as an instrument of Ethiopian foreign policy.³²⁸ Indeed, in Somalia this perception has continued to cause problems for IGAD: "Something they can be forgiven for, given the intrusive role that certain IGAD officials played in the past in Somalia", according to one IGAD official.³²⁹ This position has changed markedly under Abiy to the extent that a regional diplomat stated to us, "As long as Abiy is here, IGAD will not work as a regional body"³³⁰; Abiy is reported to have blocked IGAD holding an emergency meeting on Tigray.³³¹ An IGAD official remarked that Abiy's rejection of IGAD may in fact hold some benefits: Ethiopia "no longer uses its juggernaut to shape IGAD missions to various countries, including Somalia. Most importantly, the tainted Ethiopia officials are no longer with IGAD. And that has helped improve our image a bit."³³²

Eritrea's position vis-à-vis IGAD has also presented challenges. Eritrea's membership in IGAD was suspended in 2007 and its position with regards to the organisation in the year since has vacillated. One of the outcomes of Eritrea's removal from the organisation has been that even its most basic workings have been impacted. The CRP writes that because of Eritrea's suspension, IGAD does not hold regular summits, but instead has extraordinary summits at which the heads of state and government meet to decide on pressing issues (usually South Sudan). The IGAD Secretariat does not function as a support to either the summits or to the peace and security commitments that the organisation has taken on.³³³

Eritrean President Isias Afwerki, who has long had an antagonistic relationship with IGAD, was said to have proposed the tripartite alliance partly as a means to undercut IGAD.³³⁴ In an interview, an IGAD official said of the tripartite alliance that: "Although we've never taken a public position, I can tell you that our leadership isn't pleased with that alliance. It's seen as undermining IGAD and creating a parallel structure, which is counterproductive."³³⁵

IGAD is a 'building block' of the AU and the two organisations share the 'principle of subsidiarity' which stipulates that, first, IGAD should engage in a Horn-based issue, and if it cannot handle the issue, the AU intervenes. As such, IGAD remains the primary institution through which Horn of Africa—and to an extent Red Sea region—issues should be approached. IGAD began engaging more directly in the Red Sea region in 2019, appointing a dedicated special envoy and developing an IGAD regional position, regional protocols, and action plans.³³⁶

Red Sea Council

The wider Red Sea region has historically fallen between the remits of existing multilateral bodies, with multilateral engagement largely being siloed within the Horn of Africa, North Africa, and the Gulf.³³⁷ In particular, the far-reaching impacts of the war in Yemen and maritime insecurity—largely originating from Somalia—were said to have driven interest in developing a cross-regional mechanism.³³⁸ In recognition of this, a January 2020 summit in Riyadh launched the charter for the Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden—also known as the Red Sea Council or RSC—comprising Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. The initial stated aim of the Council was to strengthen economic, environmental, and security cooperation, especially regarding Red Sea piracy, smuggling, and immigration.³³⁹ Reportedly there was also discussion of developing a Red Sea military force through the Council.³⁴⁰ The COVID-19 pandemic broke out very soon after the Council's launch and as such, its structure and functions have stalled and its operational set-up remained somewhat unclear at the time of writing (October 2021).³⁴¹ An analyst in the UAE noted that no dedicated agencies within the RSC have yet been established.³⁴²

In any case, the RSC is important in being the first and only multilateral mechanism dedicated to inter-regional engagement in this particular space. RVI poses that “The bloc (however nascent) offers a potentially significant platform for cross-regional diplomacy and cooperation, although it faces significant challenges.”³⁴³ An interviewee in the UAE suggested that the Council, “like IGAD, will probably lack teeth in and of itself, but rather could serve as a valuable convening vessel for one of its member states, if one of them really needs to use it”.³⁴⁴

Saudi Arabia spearheaded the formation process, initiating discussions with potential members in late 2018.³⁴⁵ Interviewees in this research believed that the Council will position Saudi Arabia to play a greater role in Somalia and the Horn of Africa than it has in recent years, though the shape of this remains to be seen.³⁴⁶ Joint Sudanese–Saudi naval exercises in the Red Sea in March 2021 may already point in this direction.³⁴⁷ A Horn regional diplomat remarked that Saudi Arabia wants to create a “belt of friendly member states” through the Council and to build diplomatic prestige. It was also noted that the Chinese Belt and Road initiative passes through the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea, which Saudi Arabia is “paying more attention to” than it has in the past.³⁴⁸ The Stimpson Centre suggests that the resolution of the Gulf Crisis may be an opportunity for some degree of de-politicisation of the RSC, and that “The political realignments could permit the Council to become more inclusive in both its participating countries (different formats are possible here) and the scope of the topics it addresses.”³⁴⁹

Like IGAD, the RSC’s capacity to act will be determined by the composition and interests of its member states. Even in its initial formation, existing regional rivalries dominated decision-making about its membership. A Horn regional diplomat explained that the RSC charter went through a number of amendments, in order to take care of Egyptian interests. Saudi Arabia and Egypt both wanted to be made the headquarters.³⁵⁰ Egypt also refused to allow Ethiopia join, and so to manage this issue they decided to allow only littoral states to be members.³⁵¹ Given Ethiopia’s position as a major player in the Horn and its interests in the Red Sea coastline and Berbera port, this may become a gap in future efforts.³⁵² Indeed, Somaliland itself is not a member of the RSC—Mogadishu would not permit this.³⁵³ Given its 800 km of coastline along the Gulf of Aden and the Berbera port, this also represents a gap in the Council’s purview, which is by nature focused on littoral zones.³⁵⁴

The UAE is similarly not a member because it lacks a Red Sea coastline, though it was said to be strongly supportive of the RSC. As a state-affiliated analyst in the UAE noted, “Whether the UAE is a member of the Red Sea Council or not, they will need to be incorporated. But it remains to be seen how.”³⁵⁵ As noted above, it was suggested by several interviewees that at this stage the UAE would be able to further its agenda in the region through the Red Sea Council, via its ally Saudi Arabia.³⁵⁶

The AU

Since 2007, the AU’s engagement in Somalia has been in a security role, defined by AMISOM, “the institution’s longest, largest, and most complex peace support operation”.³⁵⁷ According to a senior AU official, the multilateral organisation has decided that it should expand its mandate beyond the AMISOM military role into a more political arena. From 2022, the AU anticipates that, as AMISOM drawdown begins, they will establish a robust political mission led by a high-level special envoy doing political work, much like UNSOM, which would engage Somalia’s political stakeholders, civil society, and others.³⁵⁸ The expectation, according to the interviewee, is that the shift in approach would be led by the AU Peace and Security Commission, which tends to be more autonomous within the AU and has better capacity to design coherent policies for sustainable peace and security for other parts of the continent, as well as to manage negative influence by other member states.³⁵⁹ As part of these efforts, the AU has set out further plans for improved trilateral coordination between itself, the UN, and IGAD within Somalia.³⁶⁰ A senior IGAD official explained that there is an MoU between IGAD and AU, and also an MoU between the UN, AU, and IGAD, for regular coordination in Somalia. The interviewee described how throughout 2021 they held monthly coordination meetings; and that during crisis periods, such as the February dispute regarding Farmajo’s term length, they met virtually on a weekly basis—adding in EU participation if they required further input.³⁶¹ As of September 2021, there had been four meetings as a quartet (IGAD, AU, UN, and EU) at the principals’ level this year. The first meetings enabled relationship building, but at the fourth meeting they developed agreements on how to support their respective special envoys on the ground in Somalia and the Horn region.³⁶²

However, the AU faces a range of challenges in trying to operationalise this transition. On the one hand, an AU official acknowledged that the Somali public has become increasingly sceptical of AMISOM, if not hostile, as a result of misconduct by peacekeepers from some of the troop contribution countries.³⁶³ Moreover, he recognised that the Somali government is firmly opposed to the idea of an AU political mission akin to UNSOM (which the FGS is already unhappy with) because they feel that this would create yet another political arm of the international community.³⁶⁴ An international diplomat posited in an interview that the AU's and IGAD's relations with—or influence over—Somalia's current president and prime minister is limited, and that both offices oppose an expanded AU political mandate.³⁶⁵ Even the AU official admitted that the western international donors are also opposed to the plans, arguing that it is “duplicitous” to UNSOM—a problem which the official said he was unsure how the AU would overcome.³⁶⁶

In any case, the AU has at the same time expressed its interest in expanding its purview to the Red Sea region, seeking to support the development of a ‘security community’ in the Horn and Red Sea arena, based on the understanding of the Red Sea as a ‘shared space’ and the imperative to create a platform for dialogue where issues of mutual interest can be addressed, including spillover of the Gulf crisis.³⁶⁷ At the same time, because of the principle of subsidiarity, IGAD is still officially the key institution mandated to handle these Horn regional issues, with the AU—including the High-Level Implementation Panel (HLIP) led by Thabo Mbeki—positioned to support it.³⁶⁸

Multi-multilateral collaboration

IGAD and the RSC have initiated efforts at enhanced collaboration which importantly, between their respective memberships, creates the potential to bring all of the key players in the scope of this research to engage multilaterally. A senior IGAD official explained that IGAD sees the RSC as its direct counterpart. Though the latter is not yet fully established, IGAD has formally recognised it as an entity within a wider cooperation agreement with the Red Sea and Gulf region.³⁶⁹ Notably, IGAD and the RSC have apparently both given each other special observer status within their memberships. In addition, they have offered observer status to Ethiopia and the UAE in their memberships.³⁷⁰ Several states have overlapping membership in both IGAD and the RSC: Somalia, Djibouti, and Sudan.

The IGAD official argued that this brings added weight and traction to the collaborative efforts and that the ‘overlap states’ have encouraged IGAD Special Envoy's office for Somalia and the Red Sea to engage with the RSC.³⁷¹

The senior IGAD official described that IGAD's ultimate objective for the Red Sea in the long term is to develop a framework of cooperation between countries on its eastern and western shores, as well as other regional and international stakeholders.³⁷² In the process, IGAD hopes to develop a model for freedom of navigation, regional cohesion, and harmony, fashioned on models for maritime cooperation used in Baltic Sea, Arctic Sea, and Strait of Malabar—models which also bring together politically, ideologically, or economically competitive countries around the common interest of shared maritime access.³⁷³

IGAD has begun “connecting the dots” by actively engaging with the council and its various member states. The IGAD official gave the example of Egypt—which is not an IGAD member but is a key Red Sea player and a member of the RSC—the AU, and Arab League. As such, the IGAD Special Envoy's office engaged the AU HLIP to conduct political outreach towards Egyptian President Sisi and the Secretary-General of the Arab League, to inform them about IGAD's intention to engage in the Red Sea arena.³⁷⁴ The IGAD Special Envoy's office and AU HLIP have also travelled to other IGAD member states, Kenya, Uganda, and South Sudan, to inform them of their plans and to elicit each country's national interest, aspirations, and concerns for the Red Sea; even though Uganda and South Sudan are landlocked, they have direct interests in major ports—Port Sudan and Kenya's LAPSSET and Mombasa ports—and so are also secondary stakeholders in the region.³⁷⁵ In addition, shortly prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the IGAD Special Envoy's office and the AU HLIP under Mbeki visited Qatar—which is not an RSC member, but that IGAD recognised as a key regional actor—to sensitise Qatari officials on IGAD's mandate and interests for the Red Sea area.³⁷⁶ The two offices also have plans to travel to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan to continue these efforts, however their visits have so far been hampered by COVID-19.³⁷⁷

In theory, other regional multilateral organisations such as the GCC and Arab League could also be folded into these efforts. Of relevance here, Somalia, Djibouti, Sudan, Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are all members of the Arab League. However, the Arab League was described by one regional

analyst as being too large and fragmented in its membership to be effective, and the GCC was similarly said to be incapacitated by division.³⁷⁸ A Horn regional diplomat emphasised that as regionally focused 'subsidiary' organisations, IGAD and the RSC remain the most relevant forums for engagement.³⁷⁹

Special envoys

The past 1–2 years have seen a proliferation of special envoys deployed in the Horn and Red Sea region, and Somalia specifically; a clear demonstration of both regional and international recognition of the political, economic, and military premium placed on this region, its current fragility or volatility, and the multipolar interests at play. In August 2021, the AU appointed former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo as its Special Envoy to the Horn as a response to the Tigray conflict³⁸⁰, while IGAD has a Special Envoy for Somalia, the Red Sea, and Gulf of Aden. In April 2021, the US' Biden administration appointed a new Special Envoy to the Horn of Africa, while the UK has a Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. France, the UN, and other institutions also have special envoys for the Horn and Red Sea region. As noted above, IGAD, the AU, EU, and UN have already held a meeting to develop an agreement on the support to their respective special envoys in Somalia, tasking them with engaging other regional bodies and working out a division of labour.³⁸¹ A senior IGAD official noted that through their Special Envoy, they have been quietly engaging with both the president and prime minister to help them end their recent dispute relating to Fahad Yasin's sacking.³⁸² A regional academic posited that the appointment of all these new special envoys was a response to the weakness of IGAD, AU, and other regional blocs.³⁸³ In general, it was felt among several interviewees that these special envoys did not yet communicate or coordinate sufficiently (no doubt partly hampered by COVID-19 restrictions), and that concrete action had been limited.

Considerations for multi-track diplomacy

The multilateral mechanisms discussed in the previous sub-sections—namely IGAD, the RSC and AU—typically prioritise track 1 approaches to diplomacy for Somalia and the wider region. In fact, the IGAD official strategy is notable for its inclusiveness, requiring that an IGAD civil society forum be involved in developing the details. However, this has never been translated into concrete action

and remains 'on paper'.³⁸⁴ That being said, Somalia and other relevant players do have some experience of incorporating track 1.5 dialogues, with varying degrees of success. The Arta conference in Djibouti in 2000 included extensive participation of civic actors: intellectuals, clan and religious leaders, and members of the business community.³⁸⁵ The 2002–04 Mgabathi conference in Kenya also featured some limited participation from civil society.³⁸⁶ In May 2021, Turkey hosted a Somalia conference in Istanbul, which brought together civil society actors, elders, and intellectuals from Somalia and the Somali diaspora to participate in some of the discussions with government actors.³⁸⁷

However, with regard to the majority of external players in the scope of this research—especially the Gulf countries, Turkey, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Eritrea—the contemporary context remains complex in that, broadly speaking, there is a limited independent or vibrant civil society. The reach of the state in most of these countries is extensive, with think-tanks, universities, and other institutions having state backing or being state-affiliated in some way—which³⁸⁸ In some cases, the state may be oppressive or constricting of genuine civil society advocacy or activism. Somalia and Kenya have a more active civil society, but even they face constraints and limitations. This has implications for whoever constitutes a 'track 1.5' or 'track 2' actor in this environment. Inevitably, some of these actors may in a way be state-affiliated or be players in Somali or regional political marketplace dynamics, but this does not necessarily mean that they should be disregarded entirely; indeed, it could arguably be considered an asset, as these actors will likely have more direct lines of communication or influence with government leadership than typical civil society actors. Furthermore, it has been argued that while the "transnational nature of the Somali state has been linked to the further entrenchment of the political marketplace dynamics, a transnational political engagement is also constitutive of a civic space that provides an alternative or counter to political marketplace dynamics...in relation to conflict mitigation, accountability to human rights abuses, and the promotion of dialogue"³⁸⁹ In particular, the emphasis should be on identifying actors with influence in Somalia and a second—or even third—country, and leveraging this.

Certainly, there is a large Somali diaspora community across these Gulf/Middle Eastern countries, and in many cases they belong to the political and business elite and have a 'foot' in Somalia and in one or more

other countries. In Somalia's neighbours, influential transboundary ethnic Somali communities similarly play influential roles in the high-level 'Somalia policy' of those countries and in business, albeit to varying extents. There are also influential members of the Somali diaspora working in the media, think-tanks, and universities in many of these countries—as well as within Somalia. In many cases, these institutions are state-affiliated in some way, but arguably this can be an advantage. For example, in a recent African Arguments podcast, Alex de Waal suggested that Somalis working at Al Jazeera in Qatar—or other state-backed media outlets in the Gulf, Middle East, or regional countries—could play an important role in helping to ensure that media content regarding regional relations and Somalia is objective and non-polarising.³⁹⁰ Analysts, researchers, and academics, even those operating within state-affiliated institutions, could also be encouraged in the same way—including both Somalis and non-Somalis. In addition, some independent, non-state-affiliated media actors—including those active in non-traditional media spaces and social media, activists, analysts, and intellectuals within Somalia; either belonging to the Somali diaspora or even non-Somalis—will have a presence in many of these countries. Such actors are arguably well-placed to support the expansion of discussion and agenda-setting within these multilateral forums beyond 'hard security' and geopolitical interests, to encourage a more comprehensive and inclusive development of a 'Somalia vision' or 'Red Sea vision'.

RECOMMENDATIONS

i. Provide logistical and technical support aimed at (re)invigorating nascent but ongoing efforts between IGAD, the AU HLIP, and the RSC collaboration, in the wake of COVID-19 related delays, to encourage momentum.

Together, the membership of forums encompasses all of the countries included in this research, with the key exceptions of Qatar and Turkey, and forms a bridge in the regional peace and security architectures that has not previously existed.

ii. When functioning even at a basic level, the benefit of these multilateral forums is that they offer the opportunity for dialogue on the sidelines of regularly scheduled meetings—at technical, ministerial, and heads-of-state level ('track 1' actors). Logistical/operational support to encourage and convene these informal or side meetings is therefore valuable.

iii. Among 'track 1' actors, prioritise spaces for multilateral dialogue on the most pressing issues in the region at present.

This research highlighted the increasing militarisation and competition over ports as being high-level issues around which dialogue and cooperation among Horn and Red Sea/Gulf/Middle Eastern countries were severely lacking. Other urgent points on the agenda could also include political financing in Somali elections, addressing refugee flows from conflict in Ethiopia, and other points of major regional instability. These issues are especially sensitive and potentially divisive, and so such dialogues should be managed and supported carefully. In this case, as an initial entry point (outside of Somalia), RVI suggests early bilateral engagement or 'quiet diplomacy' with Egypt and Saudi Arabia to signal international/donor support for the RSC.³⁹¹ In addition, given that the US appears to have some leverage among the Gulf states following the Gulf rapprochement, consideration of bringing the US into some conversations might be advantageous.

iv. Foster learning within multilateral forums and Red Sea states on managing maritime cooperation.

Within multilateral engagements between IGAD and the RSC—and the AU and Arab League where relevant—encourage technical knowledge building and information exchange from the Baltic Sea and other zones of maritime competition and cooperation around the world, using this as the basis for conversations aiming to develop a more cooperative shared vision for the Red Sea.

v. Support Somalia as an 'overlap state' to be an active proponent for IGAD and the RSC.

Somalia—along with Djibouti and Sudan—has membership in each of the relevant multilateral mechanisms (including the AU and Arab League) and therefore should be encouraged to act as a lynchpin for multi-multilateral engagement and cooperation. Somalia's delegates in the respective organisations should be supported by donor instruments to advocate for and mobilise further collaboration.

vi. Create opportunities for participation of 'track 1.5' and 'track 2' actors to participate in multilateral/regional dialogue and advocacy.

Identifying civic actors with influence in one, or ideally, more than one, of the relevant countries—including media, researchers, analysts and public intellectuals—to input into high-level/'track 1' discussions. Such actors may be independent or state-affiliated—either of which would bear certain risks to the process or the participant—and therefore external support should be very

mindful of these associations, but nonetheless encourage their inputs as an important initial effort in broadening participation.

vii. Work with 'track 1.5' or 'track 2' actors to expand the conversation. Such actors may be better placed than state actors to initiate discussions with IGAD, the RSC, and other multilateral bodies around issues such as the environment and climate change and encouraging formal and informal trade linkages. The success of some countries' scholarship programmes in Somalia is noteworthy; as such, promoting cultural and educational exchange could also be an area in which civil actors take the lead, and which could facilitate deeper trust-building between states.

viii. Facilitate enhanced collaboration among special envoys. The proliferation of special envoys to Somalia, the Horn, and Red Sea regions signals the interest of multilateral organisations and external countries in this space. Some efforts have already been made to improve their coordination with each other, however, COVID-19 has likely been among factors which have hindered this. Given that the activities in Somalia and the region by the relevant organisations and external players are heavily anchored through their special envoys, facilitating regular communication lines and convening opportunities for collaboration could be valuable.

ENGAGING THE SOMALI BUSINESS ELITE

As explored in previous sections, in many of the countries in this research, there is an elite class of Somali diaspora, whose businesses and personal lives are partly or fully located abroad, but who keep a 'foot' in Somalia. In fact, in this context, the terms 'diaspora' or 'returnees' are not entirely accurate because, in reality, many of these Somali elite business actors continually straddle or move back and forth between two or more countries, keeping business and personal assets in each. The CRP uses the term "transnational business class".³⁹²

In a political marketplace environment, such actors can be highly influential not only in the commercial sector but also in Somali domestic politics—for better or for worse. The practical nature of this relationship between business and politics has been described in Jubbaland: "Across the Somali regions, chambers of commerce are often comprised of the largest corporate actors who lobby for business actors and serve as an important check

on state power and interventions. For instance, in Jubbaland, the Jubbaland Chamber of Commerce mediates the interests of businessmen with that of President Ahmed Madobe, but this works as a more symbiotic, negotiated arrangement than is evident in Mogadishu. Madobe benefits from taxing trade through Kismayo and borrows money from businessmen. He pays for these loans by granting tax exemptions."³⁹³ As has been discussed above with regard to civil society actors, the fact that business actors and organisations such as the national and state-level chambers of commerce are often embroiled in politics could be considered both a risk and an opportunity for engagement—if the business actors' leverage over political actors can be used constructively.

They may also have influence at the political level in one or more other countries. These actors represent a key constituency, with leverage both at home and within external countries, and sit outside of the realm of the 'traditional' diplomatic or peacebuilding actors. Such actors have 'skin in the game' in both Somalia and the external countries, and therefore working with them may have more traction than other governmental or civic actors. Throughout the civil war, Somalia's private sector operated in the absence of a state, and Somali officials interviewed reflected that even today, the government plays a very limited role in the commercial space, including with external countries. An FGS minister remarked: "There's no doubt that the Somali diaspora and the private sector are in fact driving trade and investment engagements with the countries we are trading with. The state is barely visible in this space."³⁹⁴ This was corroborated by several other Somali officials. As discussed in previous sections, trade relations between Somalia and other countries often prove a lot more consistent than political or diplomatic relations and appear to have the effect of stabilising the overall dynamics. While Somalia's elite political dynamics are extremely turbulent, especially at present, business actors could represent a more consistent partner and bridge in these external relationships. Indeed, the Somali private sector has in the past played a role in Somali peace negotiations and state-building efforts. According to the CRP: "Private sector actors have actively facilitated, influenced, and bankrolled key political developments including peacebuilding conferences from 1991 onwards: the 2000 Arta conference, the establishment of the Islamic Courts Union and subsequent elections from 2012...."³⁹⁵ A diplomat noted this in an interview, suggesting that

the business sector would be a “more constructive space” than the traditional approaches to state building or stabilisation.³⁹⁶ There are indications that large Somali transnational companies like Hormuud and Dahabshiil have an interest in playing an expanded role in the Somali and regional arena—signalled already by the fact that Hormuud has started supporting humanitarian work in Somalia.³⁹⁷

Diaspora among the external countries

It is worth noting that a key driving factor in Somalia’s business elite—and indeed their political elite too—to turn towards countries like Djibouti, Turkey, and the UAE is UN sanctions and other international financial restrictions on Somalia, which make it extremely difficult for Somali businesses to transact with western countries.³⁹⁸ Moreover, many business executives with Somali passports have struggled to obtain visas for many countries around the world. As a result, they are increasingly obtaining passports from countries like Djibouti—as it offers special passports for Somali businesspeople—and Turkey.³⁹⁹

In this research, Turkey was a key location in which the Somali transnational business elite have interests among a wider diaspora. A Turkish official explained the status of Somalis in Turkey: “The political relations are dictated between the two governments, but wider relations are heavily shaped by the diaspora...In Istanbul and Ankara alone there are more than 200 companies established by Somali citizens⁴⁰⁰who financially invest in Turkey.”⁴⁰¹ He noted that the Somalia diaspora in Turkey comes from all clans and parts of Somalia but are generally elites and their families from the political and business realms. In total, the trade value between Somalia and Turkey is worth 217 million USD. This is largely driven by Somalis in Somalia and the Somali diaspora in Turkey.⁴⁰² Transnational business elites from Somalia have opened hotels and restaurants in Istanbul and Ankara and, for the first time, a direct shipping lane was recently established between Turkey and Somalia. This lane is expected to catalyse exponential growth in the trade between Somalia and Turkey and is a joint venture between Somali and Djiboutian businessmen.⁴⁰³

Interviewees in the UAE also noted the Somali diaspora living there, and large numbers of Somali-led businesses, especially in Dubai. Until a few years ago, the UAE was Somalia’s main trading partner, and this was in part facilitated by the Somali transnational business elite.⁴⁰⁴ However, in recent years, trade between the UAE and Somalia has declined sharply due to a number of factors, including the increasingly restrictive banking system of the Emirates, which many Somali businesspeople found prohibitive; high cost of commodities and services in comparison to China and Turkey; visa restrictions for Somali passport holders; and overall worsening relationship between Somalia and the UAE. For many transnational business elites, the UAE was no longer as hospitable as it once was.⁴⁰⁵

In the Horn, Djibouti represents a major business hub for Somalis which, again, the Djiboutian government has facilitated with concessions and providing access to international banking systems. A Djiboutian official noted that some of the largest Somali companies have moved their global headquarters to Djibouti because of its more conducive environment.⁴⁰⁶ Notably, Djibouti hosts the large and influential Somali Business Council, of which almost every key business actor in Somalia is a member.⁴⁰⁷

In Kenya, Somali business actors are many, and the Nairobi neighbourhood of Eastleigh is seen as a key Somali trading hub. As demonstration of the high-level links that these actors have within Kenya, during a Somali business convention in Eastleigh in October 2021, the Kenyan Minister of Finance was a speaker.⁴⁰⁸ Somalia’s Jubbaland state was said to have particularly strong trade links across the border with Kenya.⁴⁰⁹ Transnational business elites manage to move commodities that come through the Kismayo port across the border from Somalia to north-eastern Kenya, taking advantage of the low taxes on the Somalia side of the border.⁴¹⁰

Risks and limitations

At the same time, engaging such actors bears considerable risks, given the common patterns of engagement observed between business actors and political elites in Somalia. It is well known that business elites are not apolitical actors; they are embedded within the political marketplace and heavily enmeshed in elite politics, even if they do not express their politics publicly.⁴¹¹ The CRP explains that in reality, the private sector does not operate entirely independently of the state: "While Somali businesses still maintain a high degree of autonomy from the state, given their control over access to foreign exchange with the capacity to block key legislation around banking and telecommunication interconnectivity, it is not an 'economy without a state' per se, as political entrepreneurs, conglomerates and technocrats are entangled in a web of political clientelism, kickbacks and redistribution, and debt relations. This trend is evident, particularly in the large number of logistics contractors who have since run for elected office to recoup debts from the civil war and to protect business interests."⁴¹² Moreover, the CRP describes that the "traditional bourgeoisie" involved in 'big business' in telecommunications, finance, and trade; and political entrepreneurs involved in construction, transport, and logistics have different roles and interests in the political marketplace. The CRP highlights in particular actors involved in the import-export industry, construction and logistics, and other services as encouraging the conditions for "bad politics" in order to secure preferential treatment and "friends in high places".⁴¹³ Such actors use territorial control, access to strategic infrastructure, and foreign exchange in order to protect their assets and secure new opportunities. Risk is managed by a number of strategies including sending wealth abroad, contributing to a landscape of financial opacity, illiquidity, and capital flight.⁴¹⁴ In this context, there is evident risk that by being brought into formal regional engagement processes, business elites may seek to secure favourable opportunities for themselves with little genuine regard for enhancing political stability in Somalia.

The other significant risk lies in the links between some businesses and AS. The most common manifestation of this in Somalia's current climate is in the payments made by businesses in Somalia to AS as a protection racket.⁴¹⁵

In effect, Somalia's business community feels exposed and vulnerable to AS threats and, as a result, the only coping mechanism that is working for them is to pay extortion money to the militant group. Most say they would prefer to pay taxes to legitimate authorities and engage with the international banking system without additional scrutiny.⁴¹⁶ The distinction can be made that these businesses do not necessarily support AS or its ideology but are nonetheless implicated in AS's income and apparent commercial ascendancy. By the same token, it could be argued that if external actors engaged more with these business elites and drew them into more legitimate state-building processes, this might help to distance them from AS's orbit.⁴¹⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

i. Engage with the Somali Business Council as 'peacebuilding and state-building partners'.

The Council, based in Djibouti, has membership from almost all of Somalia's major businesses and therefore represents a valuable entry point to engage with this community—which has influence both at home in Somalia and in a number of other key countries. Donor instruments could approach and formally bring them into forums as 'peacebuilding and state-building partners' with Somali FGS and FMS leaders to discuss key issues. Less sensitive topics such as supporting a more conducive regional trade environment could be tabled first, followed by more critical issues such as the role and interests of external players in Somalia.

ii. Support the Somalia Chamber of Commerce to engage with their external counterparts.

Somalia's national Chamber of Commerce, based in Mogadishu, could be facilitated to engage with the chambers of commerce located in the external countries key to Somalia. Discussions around encouraging mutual trade opportunities and investment between these countries and seeking to build out from or stabilise otherwise fraught political/diplomatic relations could be supported through these groups. These activities could be conducted in parallel to formal 'track 1' multilateral processes in the key states.

iii. Engage the FMS-level chambers of commerce. Somalia also has chambers of commerce in each of the five FMSs. These umbrella organisations based in the country could also serve as valuable entry points and ‘partners’ in domestic and FMS-level issues. Given the tendency for many external players to pursue their interests directly through Jubbaland and Puntland, for example, these chambers of commerce at the FMS level could be key partners to engage on these issues; to hold dialogue and encourage cooperation regarding the interventions of external actors.

iv. Approach key Somalia transnational companies individually. Somalia’s business landscape is dominated by a few key companies—namely Hormuud and Dahabshiil. These companies have apparently already expressed some interest in expanding from purely commercial roles to humanitarian and other realms. The leadership of these companies could be approached directly as peacebuilding and state-building actors and brought into discussions with Somali national actors or into multilateral forums with external actors.

v. Engage with existing initiatives for regional economic integration and cooperation, such as the Horn of Africa Initiative, backed by the World Bank since 2019—which includes finance ministers and other senior actors from Somalia, Sudan, Kenya, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia—to further support these efforts.⁴¹⁸

ENCOURAGING MORE SENSITIVE INVESTMENTS AND INTERVENTIONS

Many of Somalia’s external partners are making major investments or interventions of varying kinds within Somalia (and Somaliland). Somalia’s coastal port infrastructure in particular has seen major external commercial investment in infrastructure and systems. Emirati parastatal DP World is developing the port in Puntland’s Bossaso, as well as the Berbera port in Somaliland. The Mogadishu port has been redeveloped and is operated by Turkish company Albayrak. In 2019, the Qatar Ports Management Company was awarded the contract to develop the Hobyo port in Galdmudug state.⁴¹⁹ It can also be speculated that, given the offshore oil and gas potential of Somalia’s southernmost coastline (for which the maritime territory was largely awarded to Somalia in October 2021 by the ICJ), infrastructure development on this part of the coastline will also develop in the coming years.

Certainly, an official in the UAE was emphatic that multilateral investment in mega-projects was, in their view, the best way to bring stability to Somalia.⁴²⁰

Examination of Somaliland’s Berbera port and corridor development led by DP World provides us a good indication of some of the issues and potential concerns to expect in Somalia when associated with such commercial investments. A political economy analysis of the Berbera development observes that in Somaliland, the effects of the development could play out in different ways: “It could be used to create broad-based benefits and thereby widely shared interests in supporting the existing dispensation. However, at least as likely if not more so, it could generate easily controllable rents” that allow a small elite to perpetuate a particular status quo—which achieves some stability but excludes much of the population.⁴²¹ Further, if material benefits from the development are perceived to be skewed, this could foment tension or opposition among dissatisfied or marginalised groups, in particular certain clans and sub-clans and young people. This in turn could drive alliances with radical Islamist groups. The analysis posed that: “If the corridor is truly transformational for Somaliland, it will have fundamental political, social, and economic effects, most of which cannot be foreseen but which will inevitably strain social bonds and test dispute-resolution mechanisms. It will create new patterns of trade and competition, giving rise both to new shared interests and new tensions.”⁴²²

A government advisor in the UAE proposed that, in light of this context, a suitable entry point for stabilisation partners in Somalia could be in efforts to engage with the companies and parastatals from the Gulf and other countries operating in Somalia⁴²³, with a view to encouraging consideration of conflict sensitivity; labour laws and practices; environmental standards and practices; and social safety nets for Somali workers.⁴²⁴

Indeed, such an approach has already been applied by peacebuilding INGO, Saferworld. In particular, Saferworld’s ‘Rising Powers’ project seeks to constructively influence China and its major transnational Belt and Road Initiative which operates across Asia and Africa—from which lessons could be drawn and applied more widely. An interviewee involved in the ‘Rising Powers’ project explained that while China is less risk-averse than countries in its operations abroad and more commercially motivated, it is not in China’s interest to invest in countries “going up in flames”.⁴²⁵

As such, what is typically defined as 'conflict sensitivity' is somewhat consonant with China's interests in risk management, and there has been a recognition among the Chinese that in the long term, their traditional approach will not sustain their social license in their countries of operation.⁴²⁶ In this regard, Saferworld has tried to encourage greater transparency and accountability at the government and business levels, with varied responses; some actors or groups have interests in maintaining business as usual, which includes a lack of transparency, and so are not receptive to a third party pushing for accountability and transparency. Other actors or groups meanwhile "look at the broader picture" and are cognisant of feelings of unhappiness, protests, strikes, or worse in their countries of operations; for these groups, Saferworld positions itself as a 'helpful' partner and over the years, has found more sympathetic ears, especially within business community.⁴²⁷

As noted in previous sections, amid shifts in the domestic and regional political climate, the Gulf countries and Turkey appear to be showing more concern for the reputational risks of their interventions in Somalia. Indeed, a diplomat mentioned cases where Somali elites had approached Gulf governments privately and had been turned away.⁴²⁸ This increased reputational concern among some external players could be capitalised upon by stabilisation partners with regards to their commercial investments and interventions in Somalia.

It should also be noted that in the Somali context, external players such as Turkey, the UAE, and others are not just investing commercially, but are also engaged in varying forms of humanitarian and development assistance. Generally speaking, many of the issues that stabilisation partners could engage with in the commercial sector could also be applicable to the humanitarian/development realms too—particularly because the UAE and Turkey do not decouple humanitarian/development assistance from their commercial interests as western donors typically do. Their assistance programmes are then subject to public review: during a Somalia conference in Ankara, Turkey in July 2021, both Somali and Turkish speakers noted that in all of Turkey's interventions in Somalia, there was room for improvement regarding their record on conflict sensitivity, gender inclusion, rights-based approaches, and social protection.⁴²⁹

As a Saferworld report further outlines, some of the criticisms that Turkish aid in Somalia has invited have been levelled at seemingly all external aid actors in Somalia: for the concentration of its efforts into or via Mogadishu; a lack of local contextual knowledge and conflict sensitivity in aid delivery; and reports of elite capture, corruption, or aid diversion.⁴³⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS

i. Encourage research and dialogue on the impact of external investments. Donor instruments could table a piece of research on the impacts of key externally driven investments on the ground among local communities, as well as conflict/political dynamics, as the basis for public and closed-door dialogues between Somali actors and actors from the external player; including representatives from both governments, businesses, and civil society/researchers/media.

ii. Approach external mega-companies and parastatals directly. Key known commercial/parastatal entities in this arena, such as DP World, Albayrak, and the Qatar Ports Management Company, could be approached by donor instruments directly to initiate early discussions and advise them on the *long-term benefits* of conflict sensitivity, social protection, and safeguarding, including through labour practices and better environmental standards and practices.

iii. Link up with other multilateral processes and initiatives involving the Somali business elite. Given the sheer scale and the weight of state backing behind many of the major entities investing in mega-projects in Somalia, efforts to engage or influence them should be approached from several levels. For example, multilateral mechanisms could be used to approach these entities at the higher levels. The Somali business and political elite may also have linkages or relations with these external commercial/parastatal entities, and so could also be supported to engage on these issues through dialogue.

TRANSBOUNDARY COOPERATION FORUM

Within the Horn, high-level relations between Somalia, Kenya, and Ethiopia have been significantly shaped by an enmeshed set of political, security, and economic relations and interests in these countries' shared borderlands. Lingering perceptions or concerns with their roots in the historical irridentist movement and Shifta wars in north-eastern Kenya in the 1960s—and similar agitations in Ethiopia's SRS—are among the contemporary factors shaping relations in this part of the Horn. While no known irridentist movements are currently active in this region, several Somali interviewees believed that these historical issues continued to feed into Kenyan and Ethiopian fears that a strong and united Somalia would pose a threat to their national interests. In more recent times, enmeshed transboundary relations between Jubbaland, greater Somalia, Kenya, and Ethiopia came to a head in February and March 2020, during a confrontation between Somali central government forces (SNA) and Jubbaland forces in Jubbaland's Gedo region, which were backed by Ethiopian and Kenyan troops respectively.⁴³¹ The Gedo incident pointed to multi-layered and highly complex internal and regional fractures: among Jubbaland's Marehan sub-clans; between the Ogaden and Marehan in Jubbaland; between the Jubbaland FMS and the FGS; and between Ethiopia and Kenya.⁴³² Underscoring this dynamic, a second high-profile confrontation took place in January 2021 in Jubbaland's Beled Hawo between the SNA and militants from across the border in Mandera, Kenya—widely believed to have been orchestrated by Madobe and Kenya.⁴³³ These events occurred against a backdrop in which transboundary and trilateral relations are influenced to some extent by Darood–Ogadeni clan elite.⁴³⁴ On the near horizon too, interviewees highlighted that the apparent spreading of conflict across Ethiopia is anticipated to have potentially destabilising repercussions on this border zone; in part because it is likely that large numbers of Ethiopian refugees will move into this area through Kenya's Moyale corridor, and because the Ethiopia retraction of troops from Somalia may create space for further AS expansion in this area.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. Provide support to trilateral border cooperation processes.** Donor instruments could convene forums or discussions around mutual areas of interest or concern between Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya regarding this border zone. Initiatives could engage on different 'tracks', with a focus on several discussion topics; discussions could begin with less divisive topics such as ways to facilitate cross-border trade. If these discussions are fruitful and the environment is conducive, discussions could then move onto more critical issues, including managing potential refugee flows from Ethiopia, or airing and neutralising historical concerns and perceptions about politics on the borderlands.
- ii. Track 1: Dialogue between political leaders.** Donor instruments could convene political dialogue between senior actors from border-adjacent areas in the three countries (counties in north-east Kenya, Ethiopia's SRS, and Jubbaland) and from Mogadishu, Nairobi, and Addis Ababa. The inclusion of Ogaden political elites would be of value here. These processes could also be linked up with parallel efforts engaging multilateral mechanisms, especially IGAD.
- iii. Track 1.5/2: Events to present research and hold public discussion.** Donor instruments could organise public forums, in which research papers on key border issues are presented by researchers/analysts, along with media, civil society actors, and business elites, as the basis for public discussion on fostering shared interests in the border zones and the provision of technical support for identified issues where appropriate. These events could be conducted in conjunction with the track 1 political dialogues, with scope for direct government–civil-society engagement.
- iv. Track 3: Assess opportunities to engage border communities.** To be effective and do no harm, cross-border programming on the 'track 3' or grassroots level in this context would first require in-depth localised political economy or conflict analysis. On this basis, donor instruments could develop activities at this level to bring together community-level actors, other local forms of leadership, and business actors to discuss cooperation around local trade and community security and resilience. At the same time, existing cross-border programming in this region (such as the X-CEPT programme and TradeMark East Africa) or previous programming experiences (such as under PEACE III) could be leveraged.

BUILDING CONSENSUS ON EXTERNAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG SOMALI ACTORS

Lastly, a key finding that emerged from the interviews with Somali actors from the FGS and Jubbaland and Puntland was—arguably surprisingly—that there was a lot more consensus among Somalia actors about the nature of external interests and involvement in the county than there was disagreement; including between those in ostensibly opposing FGS and FMS camps, and on issues that one might expect to be more polarising.

For example, when asked about particular behaviours by external players, interviewees cited strong trade relations with Somalia, an avoidance of interference in domestic politics, and long-term coherence and consistency of ‘Somalia policy’ as being the foundations of positive relations (making specific reference to Turkey and Djibouti). Meanwhile, interviewees listed the negative behaviours by external players as being domestic political interference through elite political financing and election interference; support to armed groups; and weak trade relations and an inconsistent ‘Somalia policy’ (with mention of Qatar, the UAE, Ethiopia, and Kenya). It was remarkable how similar the responses were across the board.

Another area of apparent consensus among FGS and FMS actors was in the highly transactional motivations driving Somali–external engagement from both sides. Short-term political and financial opportunism among Somali elites and external players was widely noted, in negative terms, to be the driving force underlying these regional engagements. Likewise, another area of consensus among Somali interviewees was that because the Somali government is in itself so riven with internal fractures and rivalry, its capabilities to manage the competing or pernicious external influences were very limited.

Officially, the FGS manages all of Somalia’s foreign engagements, however in reality, the FMSs are highly active in this space. It is plausible that these Somali actors themselves would be somewhat surprised to hear the similarity between their own views and those of their colleagues—even those in ostensibly opposing camps.

As such, if the wider political environment between the FGS and FMSs becomes sufficiently conducive in future, this level of consistency in the perspectives across FGS and FMS actors may present a timely opportunity to build further consensus.

RECOMMENDATIONS

i. Convene FGS and FMS officials for dialogue on external engagement. Donor instruments or diplomatic bodies could convene FGS officials, especially those from ministries or departments that engage directly with external actors—such as the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Ministry for International Cooperation, and Ministry for Planning, Investment and Economic Development—and their counterparts at the FMS level, especially in states where significant external engagements are ongoing (Puntland, Jubbaland, and Galmudug), to share their perspectives and explore areas of consensus. The emphasis should be on the *types of behaviour and actions* among Somali elites and external players that are positive for the country and should be encouraged, and those that are negative and should be resisted and what their role as Somali leaders could be vis-à-vis these external interests—as opposed to ‘calling out’ particular countries or actors. The outcome of such an event could be a public joint communique.

ii. Create space for civil society or ‘track 1.5’ or ‘track 2’ actors to input into public discussion on external engagement. Avenues should be supported for Somali activists, researchers, media, and business actors to input into public discussion around the nature of external involvement. These actors have typically been excluded from such elite interactions. This could take the form of either/ both public/online forums and media/social media content, or even by directly inviting these actors to sit in the room with the FGS and FMS officials to participate in aspects of the discussions.

iii. Cross-pollination or learning from existing dialogue initiatives—such as the Somalia Political Dialogue Platform, managed by RVI, or political mediation by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue—could be valuable in this pursuit.

6 CONCLUSION

Somalia has been described as an extraverted state, where business and political elites look to instrumentalise external sources of revenue. As such, it is liable to be a theatre where the national and geopolitical interests of its immediate neighbours and more distant powers play out. Media coverage and political rhetoric notwithstanding, the ideological backdrop to the Gulf dispute does not however map neatly across to Somalia or the Horn; rather, strategic and tactical pressures generate complex relationships both with Gulf partners and with Somalia's neighbours. Many countries have developed relationships or investments inconsistent with those of their 'allies' or which are internally contradictory at the domestic level. In this environment, it would be wrong to identify any actors as being either 'friends' of Somalia or 'enemies'; although at any one time some will be better aligned with Somali elites, or generating more positive impact for the country, than others. Somali elites are equally instrumental in brokering these relationships or transactions.

Image credit: ©AMISOM



Control of ports and maritime access animate the majority of these relationships between the Horn and the Red Sea, including in Somalia. There appears to be a general correlation between positive political relations and strong trade relations, both formal and informal.

Somalia and the Horn institutions and partners have had limited success in managing these complex, wide-reaching, and competing relationships—within Somalia or in comparable contexts in the region. The key multilateral institutions in the region are constrained in this context and have on occasion been trumped by high-level personal understandings between leaders. Nonetheless, reinvigorated global interest in the Red Sea region and its littoral neighbours does present opportunities for constructive engagement.

At the same time, there is a large Somali diaspora across these Gulf/Middle Eastern and Horn countries, which may have a degree of influence or leverage within Somalia and in one or more other countries; and Somali businesses have a clear interest in more open trading relationships, for which political stability will be a prerequisite. Importantly also, there appears to be a great deal more consensus among Somali political elites about the nature of external involvement in domestic affairs than there is divergence—even between ostensibly opposing camps—which might suggest that internally, Somalis are not as profoundly divided as they initially appear. Each of these factors offers possible openings for the international community to encourage constructive engagement—aimed at ensuring the maximum compatibility—and conflict-sensitive approaches to external engagements in the country.

7 ANNEXES

7.1 ANNEX 1: BIBLIOGRAPHY

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7.2 ANNEX 2: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

7.3 REGIONAL EXPERTS IN PHASE 1 INITIAL CONSULTATIONS

Senior academic and analyst on the Horn of Africa

Senior Somalia analyst

Academic and Somalia analyst

Gulf states analyst

Senior Somalia analyst

7.4 KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS IN PHASE 2 PRIMARY DATA COLLECTION

UAE:

Emirati academic with government/military background

UAE government advisor 1

UAE government advisor 2

Emirati academic in state-backed think tank

Analyst in international organisation

QATAR:

Qatari government security official

Qatari government official

Qatari academic at state-backed think tank

TURKEY:

Turkish former diplomat

Turkish academic and government official

Turkish government official and former diplomat

Turkish government official

Speakers in Turkey–Somalia Symposium, Ankara, July 2021

KENYA:

Kenyan former diplomat

Kenyan academic in international organisation

ETHIOPIA:

Ethiopian former government official

Ethiopian former diplomat

ERITREA:

Somali former security officer

DJIBOUTI:

Djiboutian former diplomat

Djiboutian government minister

Djiboutian think tank analyst

SUDAN:

Sudanese former diplomat

Somali former diplomat

SOMALIA:

Somali government minister 1

Somali government minister 2

Somalia government security official

Former Somalia ambassador 1

Former Somalia ambassador 2

Jubbaland state minister

Puntland state minister

IGAD:

IGAD official 1

IGAD official 2

African Union:

Senior AU official

AU advisor

INTERNATIONAL:

US diplomat

EU diplomat

Norway diplomat

INGO advisor

INGO employee

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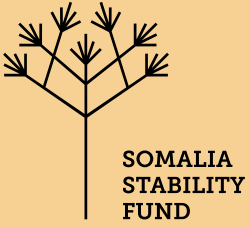
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