

The Iran Saudi Rivalry and The Scramble for the Horn for Africa

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SUMMARY

- *Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies have taken out Iran's influence in the Horn through financial incentives.*
- *Iran is looking to expand its presence in West Africa through the formation of further Hezbollah-styled ideological groups.*
- *Both Saudi Arabia and Iran are deploying soft power to increase diplomatic ties with African states*
- *The proselytization Saudi Arabia's its version of Islam in the continent is increasing Islamic extremism and religious sectarianism in many parts of Africa.*
- *In the long run the rivalry between Saudi Arabia, its allies and Iran and the emerging fractures in the relationships between the Gulf States is bound to affect the countries in the Greater Horn of Africa.*
- *The proxy war in Yemen is more than just a war for Yemen but has strategic objectives, which affect the interests and grand schemes of Iran, the Gulf States, the Horn and the big powers (USA, Europe, Iran, Russia, and China).*
- *The Yemen war is a stepping stone to the Horn of Africa and beyond.*
- *The Horn of African states that have benefitted from establishment of military bases and substantial financial investment from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states are being drawn into Middle Eastern conflicts.*
- *Ethiopia's image as a neutral giant in the region is slowly changing as it is being pulled onto the fray*
- *Ethiopia is the key to stability, peace and neutrality in the region.*

General

The relationship of Saudi Arabia and Iran has been sour for years. After the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic successive governments started instituting and implementing policies of expanding its brand of Islam (Shia)

Saudi Arabia which took upon itself the responsibility of defending and promoting its own version of Islam (Sunni) took Iran's success in expanding Shia Islamism as a threat to its own campaign to spread Sunni Islam across the globe. Saudi Arabia launched an aggressive campaign to expand Wahhabism across the world.

(Wahabism is a member of a puritanical Muslim sect founded in Arabia in the 18th century by Muhammad ibn-Abdul Wahhab and revived by ibn-Saud in the 20th century: from Meriam Webster Dictionary)

The two countries entered a fierce battle over the soul of Islam with Saudi clerics refining their anti-Shiite rhetoric and the Iranian clergy appealing to the Muslim world a Pan Islamic, anti-imperial and anti-Western sentiments among Muslims. The Saudis see Iran as attempting to revive the Old Persian nationalism and therefore a constant threat to Saudi Arabia's ambition to be seen as the vanguard and home of Islam. In response Saudi Arabia started aggressively promoting the spread of Wahhabism across the globe. During the Cold War, Saudi Arabia and Iran worked together with the United States against the Soviet Union. They accepted a division of labor: Iran provided military capabilities; Saudi Arabia provided theological ammunition and funding against the Soviet Union.¹

The current de facto king but actually the crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, recently surprised many political pundits by stating that "the Saudi-funded spread of Wahhabism began as a result of Western countries asking Riyadh to help counter the Soviet Union during the Cold War." Speaking to Washington Post, bin Salman said that Saudi Arabia's Western allies urged the country to invest in mosques and madrassas overseas during the Cold War, in an effort to prevent encroachment in Muslim countries by the Soviet Union. He added that successive Saudi governments had lost track of that effort, saying, "We have to get it all back." Bin Salman also said that funding now comes mostly from Saudi-based "foundations," rather than from the government.² Though the US may have taken the advantage of Saudi policy to expand Wahhabism, it does not in any way reduce the mission of the house of Saudi and Abdul Wahhabi alliance and sacred vow to spread this version of Islam now known as Wahhabism. The Soviet Union and now the Iran factor became tools to expanding this entrenched ideology.

"Iran's claim since the 1980s to constitute the nucleus – *Umm al-Qura*, literally "the mother of all cities" – of the entire Islamic world, as reflected in the Supreme Leader's title "Commander of the Faithful" (*Amir-ol-mo'menin*) or "Commander of the Affairs of the Muslims of the World" (*Vali Amr-e Moslemin-e Jahân*), colludes with the similar claim put forward by Kingdom of South Africa, whose King since 1986 has been granted the title "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" (*Khâdim al-arameyn ash-Sharifeyn*), to be the leader of the Islamic world."³

The aspirations of these two nations are irreconcilable. The Saudi Iran rivalry has become more than a Middle East Issue. Their rivalry has introduced a new era of direct interventions and proxy wars in the Middle East as played out in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon. It is a game that has altered global alliances, created terrorist groups like Al Qaeda, ISIS Boko Haram, Al Nusra, Al Shabab , Al Quap, etc... and

opened new frontiers. It has created a new kind of proxy war where millions who care less or don't know much about the ideological divide between Shia and Sunni, die and suffer for no good reason. It has created a phenomenon where truth and human rights have become the major victims and where small countries have become pawns of high stake political games.

After a series of twists and turns and diplomatic and military maneuvers, the emergence of the Iran, Russia, Syria and Turkey alliance in the Middle East has become a major game changer. The US has been forced to take a back seat under the force of its own folly. This new alliance has pledged to secure and respect the territorial integrity of Syria and begin reconstruction of Syria, which has to all intents and purposes won the war, thanks to Iran, Hezbollah and Russia. Turkish interest is both internal and external having to do mostly with its Kurdish minority in Turkey and its desire to take out Kurdish rebels both from its own and Syrian territory.

At the end of the day Moscow kept its presence in the Mediterranean through its Tartus naval base in Syria. The presence of Russia in the Mediterranean is a way of poking at NATO and creating division between NATO and Turkey (Turkey is a NATO member). Moscow's major objective was also to destroy ISIS, Al Qaeda and Islamic extremism in the region because of the impact it would have in its own backyard, the Caucasus. The US, Saudi and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) ambitions to have a regime change in Syria have been defeated with their major rival, Iran, as a key player and this was a very serious blow to Saudi Arabia. An alliance that was never in the calculation of politicians has emerged from the Syrian war, an alliance that is changing the power balance and rocking the traditional alliance in the Middle East and disrupting Trump's policy on Iran.

This alliance of the three, Turkey, Russia, and Iran, three countries which don't have a common agenda and whose politics have been driven by the realities on the ground have, in a complicated turn of events, dislodged the USA from the region and started to reshape the politics of the region on their own terms.

"In short, "fragile and complicated" doesn't even begin to describe it."⁴

The development of events in Iraq is also not to the best interest of Saudi Arabia and its allies. "The only thing that's clear from Iraq's May 12, 2018 election is who the voters rejected: Iran and the U.S. These two outside powers have dominated their affairs since 2003, and this is the latest sign that a growing number of Iraqis are eager to reassert their identity and independence."⁵ Neither side is the winner. Iraq will continue to be the battleground of influence in the coming years.

Saudi Arabia has created a new alliance to counter the ever-expanding influence of Iran. It's alliance with Israel is just as stunning as any political summersault in history. Arab nationalism and the Palestinian cause were the major issues that united Arab countries since their independence. Slowly Arab nationalism experienced a series of fractures and splits resulting from the Arab Spring and from within the Arab countries. National interests started preceding all other interests. The Palestinian cause and their common stand against Israel were abandoned and Palestinians have been left on their own. Every Arab country has established it's own foreign policy and alliances.

With various terrorist organizations in the Middle East defeated, destroyed and weakened and Palestine's cause in the back burner of the Arab world, Israel now sees Iran as the single most dangerous country that could challenge its security. With the alliance of Saudi Arabia, Israel and the US on a firm footing, the work to destroy Iran, weaken it or change its regime began earnestly. The first and most important step taken was America's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal. Israel's stories resonated in the white house to create an argument on Iran's threat to global and regional security and sanctions were reinstated. Defiant Iran is more dangerous now than ever. If Europe cannot save the deal Iran will be free to build its nuclear bomb making the region and the world more unsafe. Iran will once again militarily prevail in the region as the third nuclear power in the region, next to Israel and Pakistan. This is making Saudi Arabia very nervous.

Asked whether Saudi Arabia would build a bomb itself if Iran resumes its nuclear weapons program, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister Adel Al-Juber said: "if Iran acquires nuclear capability we will do everything we can to do the same." Certainly the world will not be safer and all parties know that. But that does not really matter. The end goal is not peace but to make the world more unsafe and as insecure as possible in the interest of the military industrial complex who are the key players and eventual winners.⁶

In the meantime, the proxy war in Yemen goes on and so far 10,000 civilians have been killed and millions displaced and the entire population on the verge of extinction. Starvation, disease, daily bombings, absence of all basic needs, has made the situation in Yemen as the worst humanitarian crisis in recent history. Yemen is a classic case of proxy war where Iran and Saudi Arabia are fighting their war in Yemen. Yemen shares 1100 miles of border with Saudi Arabia. Iran supports the Houthi rebellion in Yemen. (The Houthis are members of an Islamic religious-political-armed movement that emerged from [Sa'dah](#) in northern [Yemen](#) in the 1990s. They are of the [Zaidi](#) sect, and are predominantly [Shia](#)-led, though the movement reportedly also includes [Sunnis](#).) Though there are no Iranian military personnel it is believed that Iran supplies the Houthi movement with arms. Saudi Arabia, besides its desire to have a wider influence in the region has serious security problems in this remote porous border with Yemen which has enabled one of the largest refugee flows in the world and became a crossing point for Shia rebels and Al Qaeda fighters and arms smugglers. Saudi Arabia felt it was a matter of national security to intervene in Yemen.

The US though it is not involved directly it is making the situation worse by siding with the Saudi Coalition and supplying arms. In one incident more than a hundred and forty mourners were killed and five hundred were wounded in the strike.

On Jan 2018 the New Yorker in an article entitled "How the U.S. Is Making the War in Yemen Worse" by Nicolas Nicharcos, had this to say regarding this incident:

"Yemeni investigators unearthed a tail fin of one of the bombs. The serial number indicates that Raytheon, the third-largest defense company in the United States, produced the bomb, a Mark-82—a sleek steel case eighty-seven inches long, twelve

inches in diameter, and filled with five hundred pounds of explosive—. The bomb had been modified with a laser guidance system, made in factories in Arizona and Texas, called a Paveway-II. The weapons are sometimes referred to as “dumb bombs with graduate degrees.” “They had been sold to the Saudis on the understanding that they would make their targeting more accurate,” Mark Hiznay, the associate arms director at Human Rights Watch, said. “It turned out that the Saudis were failing to take all the feasible precautions in attacks that were killing civilians accurately.” On June 15 the Saudi alliance launched a big offensive on the port city of Hodeida. The Saudi strategy seems to be a starvation siege on all territory held by the Houthis and their aligned forces. There are some eighteen million people living in those territories. Eight million of them are already on the border of starvation. The Saudis want to take Hodeida to block food access for the people in Sanaa. If they succeed, or if fighting damages the harbor infrastructure, the eight million will probably die.

Arab warplanes and warships pounded Houthi positions in Yemen's Hodeida as the Saudi-led alliance tried to seize the port city in the largest battle of a war that has created the world's worst humanitarian crisis. The US Apache helicopters bombed targets with in the port and hundreds of thousands fled from the area. Arab News reports liberating Hodeida is a must for cutting the Houthi lifeline. Asharq al-Awsat, an Arabic international newspaper headquartered in London, wrote that the operations is necessary to “tighten the siege” until the Houthi “surrender to all conditions and resolutions”, “hand over their arms” and “leave Sanaa” As of June 17 the situation was dire with independent sources reporting that the battle for control of the main gateway for food shipments has already claimed at least 280 lives and it is feared protracted fighting will leave millions at risk of starvation.

Even before the war, the Arab world’s poorest nation struggled to feed itself. It is a country of deserts and mountains with dwindling water resources where only 2 to 4 percent of the land is cultivated, so almost all of its food and supplies must be imported. The war has shattered everything that kept Yemen just above starvation. Coalition warplanes blasted hospitals, schools, farms, factories, bridges and roads.

Israel supported Saudi Arabia’s intervention and according to Jerusalem Post has supplied it with drones through South Africa.⁷ In trying to prevent Iran from establishing itself in Syria, Israel and Saudi Arabia have found themselves fighting on the same side. Iran is having firm presence and influence in Syria, Iraq Lebanon and Yemen through the Houthi movement. The House of Saud and Israeli Prime Minister agreed that this was a very serious development that affected the security interests of both. Because of this equation, the alliance of Israel and Saudi Arabia was born with the objective of neutralizing Iran and its regional allies. « ***When the Israelis and Arabs are on the same page, people should pay attention***»,” Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer told Fox News about the alignment of Israel and Saudi Arabia on March 5, 2018 Now this dramatic alliance is reshaping the future of the Middle East. Israel and Saudi Arabia are the leading clients of USA. Israel has the most powerful lobbyists in the US seconded by Saudi Arabia. They are certain that they will have no problem in bringing the USA to this alliance.

Saudi Arabia the most corrupt nation on earth, with the most primitive laws leads the world in human rights violation. It is the perpetrator of extremism and financier of global terrorism. It is troubling that the only democracy in the region has sided with such a country with a clear track record of vile policies and atrocities and identified as the source and inspirations for most violent extremists in the world. Israel was once considered by Saudi Arabia as the enemy of Islam by Saudi Arabia: This is politics in its most vile form.⁸

The Gulf Council of Cooperation (GCC) is the political and economic alliance of six Middle Eastern countries, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman. The GCC was established in Saudi Arabia, in May 1981. According to the agreement the purpose of the GCC is to achieve unity among its members based on their common objectives and their similar political and cultural identities, which are rooted in Islamic beliefs. Presidency of the council rotates annually. Dramatic changes took place since then in 2017 that reshaped this alliance and showed fractures in the relationship of the members of the GCC. In Dec 2017 the UAE announced⁹ The formation of a new political and military alliance with Saudi Arabia, threw into doubt the future of the GCC's 36-year-old political and trading bloc.

The announcement, made at a GCC summit in Kuwait City, marks the latest development in a six-month dispute¹⁰ That has pitted the GCC members Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, as well as Egypt, against tiny, gas-rich Qatar. Since June of 2017 the four countries have mounted a land, sea and air blockade of Qatar. Numerous efforts at mediation made by fellow Gulf States and European leaders have failed.¹¹ Saudi Arabia has accused Qatar of funding terrorism, interfering in its neighbor's internal affairs and supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. Western leaders fear the Saudi action is pushing Qatar which houses a major US military base closer to Iran.¹²

The new Saudi-UAE alliance is bound to be seen as an alternative, if not substitute, to the de facto defunct GCC. Both countries are strong militarily, and are likely to take a more aggressive approach towards Iran – a foreign policy hallmark of Saudi Arabia's young risk-taking crown prince, Mohamed bin Salman.¹³ The Saudi led coalition launched its largest military action since their independence against the Iran supported Houthi movement. The Saudi led coalition is composed of Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and UAE.

On June 5, 2017 Saudi Arabia and its allies, including Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, cut diplomatic ties with Qatar, accusing it of funding extremist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic State. In response, Qatar said it was the victim of a policy of "domination and control" by its larger neighbor and that Saudi Arabia was, in fact, the one responsible for backing extremism. Qatar will have no choice but to ally with Iran if the standstill continues.

The Horn, Iran and Saudi Arabia and the USA

Since the birth of Christianity and Islam, shared faith and trade have made the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf ***States 'the world's most interdependent regions.'*** ***Gulf States see the Horn of Africa as their natural sphere of influence.***

The Horn of Africa is fast becoming an arena for Iran and wealthy Gulf Arab states to play out their intense rivalries with each other, “in a potentially dangerous battle for influence.”¹⁴ Qatar and the UAE have promised multi-billion dollar investments and large aid flows in countries like Somalia, Djibouti, Kenya and Sudan. At stake are the diplomatic, military and commercial ties between the two neighboring regions. But the battle for influence also has wider geopolitical significance, given the large volumes of crude oil that pass through these waters *en route* from the Gulf to the Suez Canal and beyond.¹⁵

The major US concern is preventing Iran, Russia, or China from having a strategic foothold in Yemen, as a means of preventing other powers from having any meaningful presence in the Gulf of Aden and positioning themselves at the Bab Al-Mandeb. Saudi Arabia's sphere of influence includes Yemen and losing Yemen to Iran would be the greatest security threat to Saudi Arabia. For the US controlling Yemen was an assurance to having control over the Bab Al-Mandeb, the Gulf of Aden, and the Socotra Islands. The Bab Al-Mandeb is an important strategic chokepoint for international maritime trade and energy shipments that connects the Persian Gulf via the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea via the Red Sea. It is just as important as the Suez Canal for the maritime shipping lanes and trade between Africa, Asia, and Europe. Until recently the Gulf of Aden was the most dangerous maritime zone in the world until it was overtaken by the Gulf of Guinea.

Relations between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula go back centuries, with trade playing a key component in binding their people together. Religion has also played a part. The expansion Wahhabism has been funded by the massive oil wealth of the kingdom. Mosques, Koranic schools and Imams have been provided with support over many years. Gradually this authoritarian form of Islam began to get to spread in some parts of the Horn. While some embraced it, others didn't. Somalia is an example. While most Somalis practiced a moderate form of Suffi Islam, the Islamic fundamentalists of al-Shabaab did not. Soon after taking control of parts of central and Southern Somalia in 2009 they began imposing a much more severe form of the faith. Mosques were destroyed and the shrines of revered Suffi leaders were destroyed.¹⁶

The instability that resulted from Islamic fundamentalism, of which al Shabab is the best-known proponent, has left the region open to outside influences. The numerous military bases and activities in the horn are playing their part in this. The French have traditionally had a base in Djibouti at Camp Lemonier. But it is now shared by the USA as the largest military base in Africa. The list of military bases and activities in the region is long. I have dealt with this in another research paper.¹⁷

Arab military, political and religious influence in the region is becoming stronger than ever. The latest example of an external force taking hold in the region is Somaliland, a state which unilaterally declared independence despite opposition from the

mainland. It made its coast available to UAE which is now building another base there and paying for a new road to connect Somaliland's port of Berbera with landlocked Ethiopia. Somaliland foreign minister Sa'ad Ali Shire confirmed that Somalia's North-Eastern state of Puntland has signed last year a deal with the UAE to develop its port, Bosaso.

But Saudi Arabia and the GCC are not the only counties involved in the scramble for the Horn and greater Africa. Iran is also a very active player in the region. It had tried hard to embrace Eritrea but it resulted in Riyadh prevailing. Eritrean President, Isaias Afwerki paid a state visit in April 2015.¹⁸ Later Eritrea signed a 30-year lease on the port of Assab with the Saudis and their allies in the Emirates. The port has become a staging ground to launch attacks in Yemen. The United Nations reported that 400 Eritrean troops were now in Yemen supporting the Saudi alliance.¹⁹ The United Arab Emirates has completed construction of a major base²⁰ in Assab – complete with tanks, helicopters and barracks. In November 2016 it was reported that a squadron of nine UAE Mirage fighter planes were deployed in Assab²¹ from where they could attack Houthi targets on the other side of the Red Sea. In return the Gulf states agreed to modernize Asmara International Airport,²² increase fuel supplies to Eritrea and provide President Isaias with further funding. Qatar withdrew several hundred peacekeepers from the Eritrean-Djiboutian border where they had been deployed since 2010 to maintain a 2008 border agreement mediated by Doha.

Sudan, which has deployed troops as part of the Gulf coalition has recently enraged Egypt by letting Turkey develop an old Ottoman port at Suakin, on the Red Sea. Turkey has supported the ousted Muslim Brotherhood and so did Sudan by hosting the members of the ousted Muslim Brotherhood. The establishment of a Turkish military base in the proximity of Eritrea, Yemen, and Egypt seen together with Turkey's military bases in Somalia and Qatar is extremely worrying for the Gulf alliance spearheaded by Saudi Arabia. Egypt allegedly supports the Darfur rebellion which Egypt denies.

More recently UAE countered Turkey's loan offer by giving Sudan, 1.4 billion dollars. "As Sudan struggles to tackle an acute foreign exchange crisis, the United Arab Emirates has stepped in and offered \$1.4 billion to Sudan's Central Bank." The UAE aid comes just days after SUNA reported that the central bank had agreed to a \$2 billion loan from Turkish conglomerate Ozturk to help Sudan purchase petroleum products and wheat.²³ President Erdogan recently addressed the Sudanese parliament and spoke warmly of the country's strongman Omar al-Bashir, who is accused of war crimes by the International Criminal Court. "Me and my brother al-Bashir will talk business, and I'm sure we will leave this place with handshakes on a number of big partnerships," Erdogan said. Turkey opened its biggest overseas military base in Somalia's capital, cementing its ties with the volatile but strategic Muslim nation and building a presence in East Africa. More than 10,000 Somali soldiers will be trained by Turkish officers at the base.

Egypt, for its part, last year pleased Saudi Arabia by ratifying an agreement that two small uninhabited islands near the Gulf of Aqaba belonged to the kingdom. Saudi

Arabia invested heavily in the effort to counter Iranian influence. The most notable Saudi success has been in convincing Sudan's to break its relations with Iran in 2014. Sudan accused Iran of spreading Shia propaganda in Sudan and expelled Iranian officials. This was reciprocated by Iran deploring Sudan's alliance with Saudi Arabia and Sudan joining this coalition. In 2016, the Saudis deposited \$1 billion in Sudan's Central Bank. Iran and Sudan were strong military allies in the 1990s and 2000s, with Iran providing arms and training to Sudan.²⁴

South Sudan had submitted its application to join the Arab. This year, South Sudan presented its application again. South Sudan's tense relations with its neighbors and the continued deterioration of the political and humanitarian situation seven years after independence, as well as a lack of any agreement with the rebels, were enough reasons for the south to appeal to Arabs, especially on the level of Arab investments.²⁵

There have been diplomatic moves led by Egypt within the Arab League emphasizing the importance of South Sudan joining the organization, given Juba's strategic geographical position, which serves as the Arab gateway to Africa," an informed Arab League diplomat told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity.²⁶ Abdellatif El-Menawy is Editor-in-Chief of Al Masry Al Youm, is a former Head of News for Egyptian State Television, and is the author of his article The Future of South Sudan is with the Arabs, says this:

"The concept of Arabism might need to be clarified. The South Sudanese speak perfect Arabic, if not for the policies of imposing Islam and Arabisation carried by the consecutive Sudanese governments following independence and the end of British colonialism, South Sudan would have become an important and vital extension of Arab culture."²⁷ Indeed it has been reported that recently Egypt has sent troops to South Sudan and accusations by the rebel groups of bombardments by Egyptian air force.²⁸

Egypt has established close relationship with South Sudan since South Sudan's independence. South Sudan's President Kiir praised President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi's and the Egyptian government's support for the reinstatement of stability during his visit in January 2017. Egyptian foreign ministers visit to Juba in March 2018 with promises of more assistance to offset the international arms embargo imposed on South Sudan. Sudanese President Omer al-Bashir said: "we have intelligence that they supported the South Sudanese government, and continue to support the government with arms and ammunition," in an answer to a question from a journalist.²⁹

In the short term Saudi Arabia and the UAE operate in the Horn of Africa to increase their capacity of effectively hitting targets and supplying their troops in Yemen. But Turkey is also busy with boosting economic relationships and providing humanitarian assistance. Qatar has also been involved in humanitarian assistance operations in Somalia. In the long run all four (Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE) are looking into countering the intent of Iran to have a naval presence in the Red Sea. In the long-term, all four (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE) countries are looking to counter Iran's intent to expand its naval capabilities in the region.

Ethiopia, the most populated country in the region has not taken a clear position on this emerging realignment of policies in the region. However, there have been significant exchanges of visits that could indicate Ethiopia's shift of policies towards Saudi Arabia. Ahmed al-Khateeb, a senior adviser at the Saudi royal court and board chairman of the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD), visited the site of the grand renaissance dam (GERD) and met Ethiopia's Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn and other officials to discuss GERD. Khateeb's trip came after the Saudi agriculture minister visited Ethiopia, making it the second visit by a Saudi official to Addis Ababa in less than a week. The United Arab Emirates pledged a total of \$3 billion in aid and investments to Ethiopia on June 15 as a major show of support for the new prime minister, Abiy Ahmed. The UAE will deposit \$1 billion in Ethiopia's central bank to ease a severe foreign currency shortage, government spokesman Ahmed Shide told Reuters at a palace in Addis Ababa after Abiy met with Abu Dhabi's crown prince, Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed. While Ethiopia should be grateful to this badly needed cash this move by the UAE follows a pattern of UAE to lure governments towards the Saudi UAE alliance. UAE has taken the lead amongst the Gulf States in taking significant increase in investments on infrastructure, real estate, hospitality, transportation and telecommunications in the countries of the Horn of Africa.

Unable to provide for their own food needs domestically, and uncomfortable relying entirely on food imports across long distances, and the real possibility that it will run out of oil, Saudi Arabia and other G.C.C. states have invested heavily in the purchase of land for agricultural production in East Africa. In Saudi Arabia, the King Abdullah Initiative for Saudi Agricultural Investment Abroad has played a key role in promoting deals between Saudi investors and landowners in Ethiopia and Sudan in particular.

These are a powerful forces in the region with great ambition extending to Madagascar, Seychelles, West Africa, North Africa and some Asian countries. , "It's not surprising that the United Arab Emirates was labeled "Little Sparta" by General James Mattis – now President Donald Trump's Secretary of Defense.³⁰

Export of Extremism

Fundamentalist strains of Islam, including Saudi-born Salafism and Wahhabism, form `King's College London based on the [Global Terrorism Database](#), three out of four terror attacks in the last 10 years have been conducted by people espousing Salafist ideology. Wenar said Saudi Arabia is the chief exporter of Salafism around the world, [spending tens of billions of dollars to build mosques](#), fund madrassas, finance preachers and offer scholarships to students to study the rigid form of Islam.

"Saudi Arabia is not the only factor, of course, in the spread of violent extremism. But for 50 years Saudi Arabia has been funding schools and mosques and radical preachers worldwide who have set down their particular narrow and puritanical version of Islam, which has in many places mutated into the violent extremism we see today," Wenar said.³¹

“Muslim communities from Indonesia to Kosovo have claimed that Saudi influence is responsible for fundamentalism that never existed previously. Saudi proselytizing did become intense after Iran started challenging its regional dominance, and Crown Prince Mohammed has admitted as much.³² The US administration knew all along that Saudi Arabia was a chief financier of terrorism across the globe. A leaked cable sent by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in December 2009 noted “it has been an ongoing challenge to persuade Saudi officials to treat terrorist financing emanating from Saudi Arabia as a strategic priority.” It adds: “Donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide”—running into millions of dollars.³³ Washington Post report states: “Saudi nationals make up the second largest group³⁴ of foreign fighters in the Islamic State and, by some accounts, the largest in the terrorist group’s Iraqi operations. The kingdom is in a tacit alliance with al-Qaeda in Yemen.”³⁵

Sheikh Adel AlKilbani, former Imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, when asked to comment about some of his statements about Daesh (ISIS) said that its a result of Islamic revivalism, he adds that Daesh follows the same Salafist approach that is adopted in Saudi Arabia, and that there are only some differences regarding how to punish those who contravene the Shari’a.” Islamic State used the Saudi curriculum as its own.³⁶ Saudi money is hanging in some ways European Islam. Leaked German intelligence reports show that charities “closely connected with government offices” of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait are funding mosques, schools and imams to disseminate a fundamentalist intolerant version of Islam throughout Germany.³⁷

Making his first official visit to Saudi Arabia President Donald Trump stood humbly in front of the Saudi King Salman like his predecessors and stated “I stand before you as a representative of the American People, to deliver a message of friendship and hope. That is why I chose to make my first foreign visit a trip to the heart of the Muslim world, to the nation that serves as custodian of the two holiest sites in the Islamic Faith.”

Referring to terrorism in the region he said:

“No discussion of stamping out this threat would be complete without mentioning the government that gives terrorists. safe harbor, financial backing and the social standing needed for recruitment.” One would think that he was referring to Saudi Arabia but actually he was referring to Iran. On this Fared Zakaria of CNN had this to say:

“Now, to be clear, Iran is a destabilizing force in the Middle East and supports some very bad actors. But it is wildly inaccurate to describe it as the source of jihadist terror. According to an analysis of the Global Terrorism Database by Leif Wenar of King’s College London, more than 94 percent of deaths caused by Islamic terrorism since 2001 were perpetrated by the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and other Sunni jihadists.

Iran is fighting those groups, not fueling them. Almost every terrorist attack in the West has had some connection to Saudi Arabia. Virtually none has been linked to Iran.”

Trump’s foreign policy on terrorism is in line with Saudi Arabia’s; accusing Iran for terrorist activities. “That will enmesh Washington in a never-ending sectarian struggle, fuel regional instability and complicate its ties with countries such as Iraq that want good relations with both sides. But most important, it will do nothing to address the direct and ongoing threat to Americans — jihadist terrorism. I thought that Trump’s foreign policy was going to put America first, not Saudi Arabia.”

³⁸The Horn of Africa has historically been a very tolerant region of Africa and has resisted attempts to interfere in the practice of Sunni Islam. But some Arab countries have not given up on the Horn. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates offer scholarships to young Africans to attend religious schools in the Gulf States. According to a report the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, the number of East African students enrolled in Gulf state universities has grown from several hundred in 2010 to nearly 10,000 in 2014.

A total of 10,725 foreign students were accepted in Saudi Arabia’s universities in 2017, many of whom had the incentive of scholarships and benefits offered to them.... Many of the students travel to Saudi Arabia to study the Islamic Shariah in one of the religious institutions. Saleh al-Amoudi, a professor at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, says that foreign students ³⁹ who come from abroad gravitate toward Shariah and religious studies. They are enrolled in universities and colleges that teach religious studies based on the Salafi doctrine, with various sections, including Shariah, the Quran, the Hadith, the fundamentals of religion, and contemporary doctrines.

West Africa is now an area of rising sectarian tension as Saudi Arabia. Boko Haram has many overt connections to Saudi Arabia and has a constant presence there. The group was originally led by Abubakah Lawan, who later left the country to study at the University of Medina in Saudi Arabia while the next leader, Muhammad Yusuf, found refuge in Saudi Arabia to escape a Nigerian security crackdown in 2004. The current leader of Boko Haram Abubakar Shekau according to his spokesperson Abu Qaqa, has also confirmed that their leaders “travelled to Saudi Arabia and met al-Qaida there” in August 2011. ⁴⁰

The Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) is a jihadist organization with strong support among the 5 million Shia Muslims, by some estimates, living in Nigeria. Founded in the early 1980s, it has flourished with cash, training and support from Iran. Indeed, the roots of the IMN can be traced to the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution, when Nigerian students belonging to the Muslim Student Society traveled to the Islamic Republic and were trained with the goal of establishing an Iranian-style revolution in Nigeria.

The leader of the student group was Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky, a firebrand Sunni turned Shia religious extremist who was first influenced by the works of Sayyid Qutb, the intellectual force behind Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and whose ideas form the basis of al Qaeda’s ideology today. Remarkably, Zakzaky switched sides and became

an adherent of Shia Islam, encouraged by Iranian funding and training, both religious and military.

Since becoming the leader of the IMN in the mid-1980s, Zakzaky has had numerous confrontations with the government, including being imprisoned for nine years. From 1981 to 1984, for example, he was jailed for sedition and for declaring he would recognize no governmental laws or authority except those of Islam. (From my article published on CNN, Global Public Square)⁴¹ in December 2015, Nigerian army attacked a religious ceremony held by Sheikh Zakzaky. During the attack the scholar's sons along with many his followers were killed and the scholar and his wife were detained. The army said its confrontation with the Shia sect members who had erected a makeshift roadblock near a mosque resulted from an assassination attempt on the army chief of staff, Lieutenant General Tukur Buratai, whose convoy was passing by. In an internal military document seen by Human Rights Watch, the army said protesters appeared to be taking up positions near the back of the convoy.

Human Rights Watch stated that the killing of hundreds of Shia Muslim members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), by Nigerian army soldiers from December 12 to 14, 2015, appears to have been wholly unjustified. "The Nigerian military's version of events does not stack up," said Danie Bekele Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "It is almost impossible to see how a roadblock by angry young men could justify the killings of hundreds of people. At best it was a brutal overreaction and at worst it was a planned attack on the minority Shia group."

"Iranian officials have condemned the Nigerian army's crackdown on a Shi'ite religious sect that reportedly left hundreds dead in the country's north. Iran's parliament on Tuesday called on the Nigerian president to launch an investigation into the deaths, while the foreign ministry summoned the top Nigerian diplomat to protest the killings."⁴¹ Iranian President Hassan Rouhani called Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari to say "some pursue discord among Muslims" and that when "terrorism is a serious threat against many Muslim countries' security, the Muslims need to unite". Iranian state TV said Rouhani said he expects the Nigerian government to compensate bereaved families and injured victims.⁴²

Let us examine Senegal to see how Iran Saudi rivalry is played out in West Africa as told by Reuters. In Senegal's seaside capital, a branch of Iran's Al-Mustafa University teaches Senegalese students Shia Muslim theology, among other subjects. The branch director is Iranian and a portrait of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei hangs on his office wall. The teaching includes Iranian culture and history, Islamic science and Iran's mother tongue, Farsi. Students receive free food and financial help. The university is a Shia outpost in a country where Sufism, a more relaxed, mystical and apolitical form of Sunni Islam, is the norm.

Two miles away, the Islamic Preaching Association for Youth (APIJ) teaches the strand of Islam that predominates in Iran's great religious, political and military rival — Saudi Arabia. The APIJ funnels cash from donors in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Dubai and Kuwait to mosques run by Salafists - conservative Sunni Muslims who are sworn enemies of Iran. The APIJ's shelves are stacked with Salafist theology texts adorned with gold-leaf Arabic inscriptions — texts its imams use to preach in some 200 mosques across Senegal.

The two institutions embody a contest for influence in Senegal, and more widely in Africa, between Iran-backed Shias and Saudi-funded Sunnis. It's one strand of a broad power struggle in which each side is spending millions of dollars to win converts. At stake is huge political influence, on a resource-rich continent that has often served as the theatre for rivalries between world powers.⁴³ In July of last year Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad established an a five-nation coalition force in the Sahel region of West Africa to combat terrorism and transnational crimes. Saudi Arabia and UAE have pledged to financially back this coalition.

Iran has also been seeking to establish an economic foothold in the continent of Africa as Tehran sees Africa as an untapped and potentially lucrative market, as does Qatar. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been looking at the Sahel region of West Africa as a major source of investment particularly in land grabbing. In an interview Professor Nader Entessar explained the Iran Saudi rivalry in Africa: "We should look at the Saudi-UAE move in the Sahel not in isolation but in the broader context of their rivalry with Iran," The three main reasons for this kind of support are economical, strategic and religious.⁴⁴

CONCLUSION

The Horn of Africa today, is the most militarized and security complex with the largest number of foreign military bases in the world.⁴⁵ Though Egypt and Yemen are not part of the Greater Horn they are however part of the security complex. They are all connected through the Nile (Sudan, South Sudan, Egypt and Kenya) or the Red Sea, which is the strategic body of water linking the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean through Bab Al-Madeb, a Strait, which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea. It is known as the "choke point"; because much of the world's commerce goes through this maritime route. At one point, when Somali pirates ruled the sea, the area was called the most dangerous maritime zone in the world. Now it has been replaced by the Gulf of Guinea. Those who control the Horn of Africa control a major chunk of the world's economies. The European economies would not be able to hold on for long without the energy supply from the Persian Gulf and vital Asian imports. But the region is also known as 'the world's most interdependent regions.'

There are notable rivalries between the countries of the Horn of Africa. (Somalia and Ethiopia, Ethiopia and Eritrea, Egypt and Ethiopia, North Sudan and South Sudan.) There are also instabilities in all the countries in the Horn. (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan and South Sudan, Somalia, Yemen) Europe, USA, China, countries of the Gulf, Israel, Turkey and Iran have also competing and conflicting interests in the region.

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and Iran on one side and the rivalry of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Gulf state of Qatar on the other is spilling poison into the Horn of Africa, adding more to the existing hostilities between the countries of the region. The civil war just across the Red Sea in Yemen is further increasing regional tension. Egypt, Somalia, Djibouti, Sudan, South Sudan, have seized on this opportunity to benefit from this new alignment in the region by

offering bases. The countries of the Horn of Africa have been called on to take sides; many officially espouse neutrality, yet offer naval and military facilities.

Egypt has always been monitoring the activities of successive governments in Ethiopia and reacts when it is not to its best interest and has always tried to manipulate leaders and opposition forces to influence policies. “Egyptian media lashed out at Saudi Arabia over a high-level Saudi delegation visit to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) during a short trip to Ethiopia on Friday. Experts said the decision to visit the GERD was an act of revenge against Egypt that could deepen tensions between the two countries.”⁴⁶

“Egypt is not obliged to continue to contain its reactions towards Saudi Arabia... any interference [by Saudi Arabia] in the GERD project implies a direct threat to Egypt’s national security,” he said on Egyptian TV.⁴⁷ Khayr went as far as accusing Saudi policy makers of being “amateurs” that have caused bilateral relations between the two countries to completely break down as a result of this visit. Ahmed Moussa, another journalist, threatened Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states that if they were to invest in Ethiopia, their investment would be lost in the Nile.

Ethiopian delegation headed by the former Prime Minister Haile Mariam Dessalegn made a very successful visit to Saudi Arabia back in 2016, where he discussed with high-level Saudi officials including King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud on various issues. Foreign Minister Dr. Workneh Gebeyehu and former Labor and Social Affairs Minister Abdelfattah Abdullahi also concluded successful visits to the Kingdom in 2017, paving a way for the two countries to reach a labor deal that is expected to have a paramount importance in ensuring the rights of Ethiopian domestic workers, and in regulating contractual obligations among Saudi employers.

The new PM of Ethiopia made his first foreign visit to Saudi Arabia in May of this year. The warm relationship between the two countries was manifested by the willingness of Saudi Arabia to release 1000 Ethiopian migrant workers who were languishing in Saudi prisons. We cannot read much into this except what has been stated; but suffice to say that Ethiopia has to play it safe with Saudi Arabia. It is true that Ethiopia had relationships with Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula. That was long before the creation of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia was carved out of the Arabian Peninsula and became independent only in 1932. Since the creation of Saudi Arabia relationships have been rocky because of Saudi Arabia’s and the Arab world in general support to the Eritrean secessionist movement and refusal to condemn Somalia’s claim over the Ogaden and its invasion in 1979. . It can be said relationship flourished only after the TPLF took power and particularly with the emergence Mohammed Al Amoudi an Ethiopian-born Saudi national who also holds Ethiopian nationality is the richest man and said to be the second largest employer in Ethiopia after the government “Between 2010 and 2015, the kingdom put into operation around 22-investment projects with a capital of 6.7 billion Birr (Ethiopian currency), making it the fourth largest investor in Ethiopia.”⁴⁸

Saudi investment and interaction with Ethiopia have been enhanced by agreements over the years including agreements on Ethiopian labour force in Saudi Arabia. There is a very large Ethiopian workforce in Saudi Arabia including undocumented Ethiopians, who are estimated to be over 400,000.⁴⁹ Sheikh Al Amoudi was amongst

the 49 richest Saudis who were arrested and detained at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Riyadh in November 2017 by the Saudi government. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the value of Ethiopian goods exports to Saudi Arabia in 2016 was approximately half a billion dollars, while the value of its imports from the kingdom was about 301 million dollars. Saudi investors, particularly Al Amoudi, get the largest portion of direct economic investments.⁵⁰ One of Al Amoudi's most valuable assets is Preem, which bills itself as the largest fuel company in Sweden. In Ethiopia, he has invested in agriculture, cement production and gold mining.⁵¹

The governing Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) and in particular some of prominent elites have taken Al Amoudi's opinions and positions on the economy, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States very seriously. Shekh Al Amoudi is certainly a controversial figure to say the least. One of the requests of the new Prime Minister during his visit to Saudi Arabia was the release of Sheikh Al Amoudi who is also an Ethiopian citizen.

Ethiopia's neutrality in the politics of the Gulf States is being questioned. Like Eritrea it is slowly being dragged into the Saudi UAE alliance through the power of money. Saudi Arabia may be able to do what the Arab league has tried for decades and failed: **making the Red Sea an Arab lake and bringing the Horn into the orbit of the Arabian Peninsula and 'whhabising' the region.** For the countries in the Horn it comes with a big price to be paid in the long term. It will be a big folly if Ethiopian government falls prey to this grand Arabian scheme for a short term gain. Neutrality and caution by Ethiopia will have positive consequences in creating stability in the region and Ethiopia can be seen as the lead power in regional politics as it used to be. The two rivers, the Nile and The Wabishebeli, are the lifelines of Egypt and Sudan and Somalia respectively. Djibouti is highly dependent on the revenues from its ports and imports from Ethiopia. Eritrea is a country of 4 million with a giant neighbor but it is strategically located and can be a force that can tilt the balance of power in the region. Both countries know that their destinies are determined on the basis of good relationships. South Sudan is a ruined country and stability in South Sudan will depend on the level of its cooperation with Ethiopia. Ethiopia is central to political stability in the Horn. Ethiopia has all the cards and the opportunity. With democratization, internal stability and steady economic growth, Ethiopia can be the regional powerhouse with the capacity and the moral high ground to dictate peace and neutrality in the region.

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(Prepared for the Africa Institute for Strategic and Security Studies)
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