

## Greater Horn: Shifting Alliances

### Part Three

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, Israel's war on Gaza, and Lebanon, Houthi's blockage of the Red Sea, and the prospect of a wider regional war demanded the attention of the global community to the point that there is only limited interest in the civil wars in Sudan, Ethiopia and the crisis in the Horn of Africa. Yet the danger must not be ignored. The Ethio-Somaliland agreement, the various defense pacts, the trafficking of arms and people, the presence and activities of several non-state actors, and the threats of war are serious indicators of the potential for greater regional conflagration. The tensions between Somalia, Somaliland, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt have revealed the formation of alliances between regional powers and competitors in other parts of the globe that will lead only in one direction: **proxy wars and failed states**. This has already begun in Sudan and the people as always are paying the price. If the international community particularly the USA does not take a more active role in easing these tensions, the entire region will become a war zone.

#### **Egypt, Türkiye, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan**

In Libya since the beginning of its civil war, Egypt and Türkiye have been supporting opposite sides through direct involvement. The government of in the West of Libya is supported by Türkiye and the administration to the East by Egypt, the UAE, and Russia. Now, as world alliances shift with the crises in the Horn and the Middle East the two governments seem to have mended their differences in order to advance their interests. Egypt's President el-Sisi recently traveled to Ankara to meet Türkiye's President Erdoğan where they signed more than 30 memorandums of understanding designed to increase trade. "The two countries have been brought together by the need to boost their economies, as well as concern about the war in Gaza." (Wintour)

In the Red Sea, the interests of Türkiye and Egypt are broadly aligned with the interests of Somalia, including its sovereignty over the self-declared nation Somaliland. The recent memorandum of understanding (MOU) between Somaliland and Ethiopia has thrown international relationships of the region into uncharted territory, and Türkiye worries that it might affect its interests in the Red Sea. Egypt, of course, has never wanted to see Ethiopia stronger than it is today, and if it were to get access to the Red Sea and possibly have a naval post, it would endanger Egypt's vital interest in that region.

Consequently, Somalia and Türkiye announced a defense agreement that includes backing for sea assets and allows Somalia to reassert its maritime sovereignty—a move that many believe is intended to impede Ethiopia's sea access agreement and place the Turkish navy in a strategically important region, thus giving Ankara a huge advantage over its competitors. This follows years of Turkish attentiveness to Somalia which includes providing drones for counterterrorism strikes and agreements for petroleum exploration and extraction (Baez).

The Arab League, led by Egyptian President el-Sisi, has expressed support for Somalia and condemned the MoU between Somaliland and Ethiopia. Egypt has had

a strained relationship with Ethiopia for years over the \$4 billion Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which Ethiopia built on the Blue Nile, and now they disagree on its filling and operation.

In the civil war in Sudan, the leader of the so-called “transitional government,” General Al Burhan, counts on Egypt as his primary supporter, and not just in soldiers and warplanes. Half a million Sudanese refugees have crossed the border to Egypt since the war began and survived only through Egypt’s assistance (Amnesty).

Besides sharing history, language, culture, and borders, they share the Nile River and have Ethiopia as a neighbor, where the source of the Nile is located. The river is an indispensable lifeline to both and they cannot afford to have an open war with Ethiopia. But they should be aware that the Nile is more important to the two countries than it is to Ethiopia. Ethiopia will get an important boost in its electrical power from the dam, but it can continue to exist without the Nile. Egypt and Sudan cannot. Ethiopia can easily divert the flow of the river in a one-day operation. Constructing a dam in a river will only impede the flow of water in that river, causing the water to back up behind the dam, and raising the water level. But if you reroute the direction of only one of the tributaries feeding the Nile it will create an immense unmanageable crisis in both countries. This can be done by a reckless government or by a responsible government that is left with no choice in order to maintain the integrity of the nation.

Egypt’s continuous threats and interventions to have unilateral control over the Nile will not work. It is in fact counterproductive to its own self-interest, even to its very existence. Egypt underestimates the power Ethiopia has in this matter and cannot continue to dictate the use of water as it did in colonial times. It must adjust to the new Ethiopia, which now has the second-largest population in Africa. Responsible governments are expected to give priority to their people before helping their neighbors. It should be obvious that Ethiopia will make sure its own citizens are taken care of first and those downstream will be considered after.

Besides Egypt, the Sudanese government of Al Burhan is also counting on Türkiye for support in its civil war. The Turks have been sending humanitarian supplies since the war began, and in a recent meeting with the Turkish ambassador, Sudanese officials expressed their gratitude to Türkiye’s government and people for supporting the Sudanese people during the war. (Sudan Looks).

To return to Egypt, the network of alliances it is forming includes South Sudan on Ethiopia’s western flank, where in Jan 2024 the two governments signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to enhance military cooperation (David). Having a military base or presence that close to its primary adversary, Ethiopia, would put Egypt in a better position to apply pressure.

## **The Gulf Nations**

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) brings together six Arab countries – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)– to further political and economic integration amongst them. It was created to counteract the rise of Iran as a political power after the 1979 revolution and there were great expectations that the GCC would bring about a resurgence of Arab nationalism which had collapsed

over the last decades. However, the GCC itself is now on the brink of collapse as disputes and interests have made united GCC positions on the Middle East and global affairs impossible.

Along with Iran, the United States, China, and Russia, the GCC countries are all involved in the contest in the Horn of Africa, focusing on the Somali coastline for security and commercial reasons. In particular, the UAE is pursuing independent bilateral trade agreements, bypassing the GCC, and has increased its investment in ports, military bases, and infrastructure in Djibouti, Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea (Aidi).

The UAE is investing heavily in logistics to boost its economic presence, but its African initiatives are not limited to the Horn. Across the continent, they are performing a strategic balance between global powers such as France, the US, and Russia, with their companies starting to dominate certain sectors (Olech). It goes further than just ports and bases. 90% of the national food supply of the UAE and other Gulf countries is imported, so the UAE is buying agricultural lands in several African countries, with Ethiopia one of the major targets. For this reason, the UAE sponsored an agreement requiring Ethiopia to gain access to the sea in Somaliland, with its established aim being to invest in and control the port (Sambidge).

The UAE, through Dubai's DP World, has made significant investments in the development of ports in Somalia, particularly in Berbera and Bosaso, despite the political tensions concerning the declaration of secession by Somaliland. The UAE was behind engineering the MoU between Somaliland and Ethiopia. In general, the UAE has become the architect of Ethiopia's foreign policy. It has supplied arms to Ethiopia, trained the Airforce, and provided a special security unit for PM Abiy. Ethiopia has joined the UAE in supporting the RSF in Sudan, hence showing clearly its rivalry with Eritrea, which supports the transitional military government.

The RSF leader, General Hemedti, has grown rich in the Emirati gold industry. Africa Report of January 2021 states:

"Mohamed 'Hemeti' Hamdan Dagalo, number two in the transitional government, has substantial interests in the industry. His family company, Al Gunade, is in gold mining and trading, with stakes held by his brother Abdul Rahim Dagalo and two of Abdul Rahim's sons. Hemeti is listed as a director, according to documents seen by the NGO Global Witness. **Sudan today exports \$16bn of gold to the UAE each year.**"

The UAE has a monopoly on the trade in minerals from Africa, including gold, and also controls the trade in illegal arms for the RSF. There are reports that it has established a military base in Amdjarass, Chad, "where it facilitates military support to Hemedti — an allegation deemed 'credible' by the United Nations but denied by Abu Dhabi." There are also allegations that "The UAE controls the entire illegal arms trade into Sudan that is benefitting the RSF through Uganda and Chad... This is all part of the UAE's quest for relevance, becoming a key broker and interlocutor between non-state actors it controls and great powers' " (Fenton-Harvey). For its part, the UAE has denied supplying weapons and has said its role in Sudan is focused on humanitarian support and calls for de-escalation.

Sudan has become a proxy war between the chief rivals of the GCC, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. As one Middle East scholar put it: “For Saudi Arabia, controlling Sudan could enhance its stature as a regional leader and strengthen its influence in the Arab and Islamic worlds...On the other hand, the UAE sees Sudan as a means to weaken Riyadh’s dominance in the region and expand its power. For the Saudis, food security and the Red Sea security are paramount. For the UAE, gold, mineral resources, and a presence on the Red Sea and, therefore, influence over the commercial routes between the Suez Canal and the Bab el-Mandeb strait are very important” (Saudi-Emirati Rivalry)

### **Russia and Iran**

Despite the fact that Russia was benefiting from the gold trade with the RSF, it is now reconsidering its support for the rebels, and switching to the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and Transitional Sovereignty Council. Its backing of the SAF re-aligns it with the policies and strategies of Iran, which is already sending drones to the SAF. The shift may also free up Russian resources to use in Ukraine and other areas of Africa. Unfortunately for the Sudanese people, Russia’s backing of the SAF will likely extend the war, and undermine peace talks. (McGregor, Kerr)

Russia is also angling for a naval support center at Port Sudan and would ultimately like a harbor on the Red Sea. This has been a subject of discussion for years, even as far back as 2017 when Presidents Omar al-Bashir and Putin reached a deal on constructing a Russian base with room for four ships. (Kerr)

### **Nonstate Actors**

What used to be known as the Wagner Russian mercenary group is operating in the vicinity of the Horn of Africa, in the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya, Mali, and Sudan. The group’s activities in Africa are now under the Russian Ministry of Defense and named the African Corps. It is known that it operates with the Sudanese RSF in Darfur and is supplying them with missiles (Elbagir et al.). These Russian activities have drawn in Ukrainian special forces to fight the Wagner group. (Sabbagh). Another proxy war on Sudan’s soil.

Close to the Greater Horn another mercenary group is active under Erik Prince, the founder of the infamous Blackwater group. Prince has violated UN sanctions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) according to the UN Group of Experts monitoring the country’s arms embargo. In December 2023 they claimed that Prince tried to broker a deal to deploy 2,500 Latin American mercenaries in the country’s mineral-rich North Kivu region. No one seems to care. “The allegations come amid a deteriorating situation in the region: an explosion of fighting that could turn into a war between the DRC and Rwanda, the imminent withdrawal of an embattled UN peacekeeping mission, and a swirl of mercenary activity and foreign interests” (Picard). Experts speculate that Blackwater could be involved on one side or the other in Sudan.

## USA in Somalia

Since the signing of the Ethiopia-Somaliland agreement, numerous prominent US officials have released remarks reaffirming the US's support for Somalia's territorial integrity. The UK also supports Somalia. However, support for the sovereignty of Somalia seems to be qualified by US and UK officials advising the parties to resolve through dialogue.

One member of parliament in the United Kingdom, Alexander Stafford has taken a different stance, advocating for the UK to officially recognize Somaliland in the wake of the Ethiopia-Somaliland deal. This would be a mistake. When superpowers persuade a country to open a dialogue about internationally acknowledged boundaries they often have their own interests in mind. They fail to understand the feelings of its people who have lived and died for a land that has always belonged to them. During the decolonization era, Africa agreed to abide by the boundaries the colonizers had drawn up, despite the wrongs that had been done in partitioning Africa at the time of the Scramble for Africa. That agreement has prevented a lot of bloodshed over the years.

An example of what happens when attempts are made to change boundaries can be found in the attempt of extremist Somalis to create a Greater Somalia that would include Ethiopia's eastern provinces, the Kenyan territory known as the Northern District Frontier (NFD), and Djibouti: lands inhabited by ethnic Somalis. That movement led Somalia to invade Ethiopia in 1977, and a bloody war followed before the Somalis were driven out. For Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti, the best guarantee for peace in the region is the status quo of the boundaries. Any change must be based on mutual agreements only.

Today Somalia is a failed state, partly because of mistakes of its own making and later America's unwarranted intervention and eventual retreat. During Somalia's civil war the United States sent in troops as part of a UN peacekeeping mission. Oct. 3, 1993 saw the downing of two U.S. helicopters and the deaths of 18 American soldiers. Some of their bodies were dragged along city streets by Somali militants, causing the US to withdraw all its troops. However, since then, the U.S. has continued to wage economic and military warfare in Somalia, first to eliminate the Union of Islamic Courts, which was a legal political group, and most recently to attack the militant group al-Shabaab. Ironically it was the attack on the Islamic Courts with the help of Ethiopian troops that created al-Shabaab. .

According to Professor Jason Mueller, scholar of US Somali relations, there have been at least 282 U.S. counterterrorism operations in Somalia, including drone strikes. "But it's my belief ...that U.S. efforts to develop political stability and eliminate terrorism have achieved the very opposite... In fact, al-Shabaab is still waging one of the largest and deadliest insurgencies in the world" (Mueller).

## **The US in Sudan**

After years of economic restrictions on the Sudan because of human rights violations by the government of Omar al-Bashir, the United States ended the sanctions in 2017. This was a monumental event for the Sudanese who celebrated the occasion with the hope that it would improve their lives. It has not turned out that way.

In 2019, following popular upheaval, al-Bashir was overthrown by Gen. Al Burhan and Gen. Dagalo (Hemedti), the head of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). A transitional government was set up, composed of civilians and military officers working together under the leadership of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok to move the country toward elections in 2023. But after two years, Gen. Al Burhan arrested Hamdok in a coup d'état, taking the US by surprise. The people protested in the streets against the military's move, demanding the return of power to the civilian transitional government, but it did no good.

These events demonstrate the loss of US influence in the country, and indeed the region. The US special envoy for the Horn of Africa, Jeffrey Feltman, reported that the US knew of "tensions" leading up to the coup, but he "didn't see this coming" (Sullivan). With the military in control and killing protestors, President Biden suspended a \$700 million dollar aid package and demanded a return to civilian government.

According to New Arab of Nov 2021 and other sources, one reason for the coup was a deal brewing with the US and Israel: in exchange for a billion dollars in financing from the World Bank, Sudan's government, along with the UAE would sign the "Abraham Accords," normalizing relations with the state of Israel. Hamdok's government wanted to postpone a final decision on that deal until after the elections in 2022, but Israel indicated it would support Al Burhani's coup if he recognized Israel immediately. Israeli officials were worried that a civilian government would put the question of normalization to a vote, and that it would be an unpopular move. They believed they would have a better chance with military leaders and that the USA would accept the coup because of its value to the Israelis. The transition to democracy in Sudan was not something either the US or Israel were overly concerned with, and thus fell victim to these secret pacts. Sudanese political analyst Jihad Mashamoun reported that the Biden administration wanted to have Sudan as a regional ally of Israel to counter Iran, and it wanted to close Sudan's Port to the Russian navy. (Bajec) With the outbreak of full-scale war in both Sudan and Israel, the recognition of Israel has still not been finalized.

The United States has not been at its best in this region, to say the least. *Washington Post* foreign policy analyst Josh Rogin accuses the Biden administration of incompetence: "In October 2021, the generals stamped out the civilian leadership for good. But President Biden failed to impose sanctions on them for their power grab and the increasing state corruption. As the infighting intensified, the United States ceded international diplomatic leadership to other countries and failed to properly support civil society groups opposed to military rule" (Rogin).

## **Ethiopia: The Epicenter.**

The crisis in Sudan is still unfolding, and it is not appropriate now to predict the direction of this war. It is part and parcel of the crisis in the Greater Horn. No country in the Horn will go down alone. Ethiopia is at odds with each of its neighbors. Internally, it has fallen apart with genocide and the most heinous crimes against humanity taking place. The country is ruled by its factions. PM Abiy controls only the city. Like Somalia, like Sudan, it has become a classic failed state though the USA does not want to admit it.

Kenya is worried about the spill-over effect as PM Abiy talks about expanding his so-called "Cushite empire," which would include some parts of northeastern Kenya, the port of Mombasa, and Somaliland. Recently, I watched a Kenyan Television Network (KTN) clip in which Kenyan officials publicly expressed their worries in an intense discussion about the ambition of PM Abiy to establish a Cushite Oromo empire extending across Kenya to the Red Sea Coast of Mombasa. Somalia is worried that Ethiopia will start a war to distract Ethiopians from the severe problems they are facing. Eritrea is worried as well, as Prime Minister Abiy publicly supported the training and arming of Eritrean rebel forces within the territory of Ethiopia with the sole purpose of overthrowing President Isaias. Just this week, the Prime Minister publicly stated that he would make Eritrea 'Gaza' in one month. He has warned Somalia of war as well.

Unless managed urgently the crisis will be out of the control of the governments of the Horn of Africa countries. It will inevitably be connected to the Middle East crisis and become one huge theater of war in which no one country will be spared and no country will win. America is on notice again. Too many times in the past it has missed a crisis that is staring it in the face. That should not and cannot happen again.

As I said at the beginning, the prime problem in the Greater Horn is one man and only one man. PM Abiy has everything to do with much of the current crisis. There would have been no such crisis without Abiy. All those involved in the making of this paranoid dictator will lose eventually. Their calculus is wrong. The saddest part is the price the poor people of the region (294 million, est) will have to pay through genocide, war crimes, death, starvation, and mass migration of millions, and a security crisis that will shake the countries of the Nile Basin, the coastal states of the Red Sea, North Africa, and the Middle East undoubtedly. Are those appeasing PM Abiy ready for this?

A historian by the name of David Carlin wrote: "Many British and French political leaders had staked their hopes on appeasing Hitler to avoid war. Appeasement was a fatally flawed policy. Churchill condemned appeasement as the strategy of feeding a crocodile in the hopes it would eat you last. He recognized that Hitler was insatiable, and each meal only made the crocodile more dangerous. (World War II: How Western Leaders Failed To Stop the Nazi Rise)

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