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**The Middle Eastern Scramble for the Horn of Africa:
Humanitarian, Agricultural and Educational Aspects**

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A number of analysts and observers have noted that in the Horn of Africa, contemporary Middle Eastern states are now influencing events on the ground and long-term patterns of change. Moreover, the regional divisions within the Middle East, such as the divide between Iran, Turkey and Qatar on the one hand, and the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt on the other, impacts how they compete for shares in the economic and human potential of the Horn of Africa, which includes about 150 million people.¹ Indeed, it seems that the Horn is one of the more turbulent regions in the world, which at the same time is among the most geopolitically and economically important. Currently, the intersection of global, regional, national, and local interests is creating rapid change and political transition.

Since the end of the Cold War, with the transition from a bipolar to multi-polar world, new powers such as China and the Middle Eastern states are becoming much more involved in various aspects of regional development and the humanitarian issues facing the Horn of Africa and the linked Red Sea area. This paper will focus on these two aspects, showing how Middle Eastern powers, especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Turkey from the one hand, and Iran and Qatar on the other hand, are trying to increase their involvement in this region. We will address the ways that their involvement is shaping the fate of the region, for better or worse.

Humanitarian aid is relevant in particular to the Horn of Africa, which has been suffering a constant crisis of famine since the 1980s, resulting from the combined effects of climate change and political instability. The many states of this region share common vulnerabilities, such as 80 percent arid and semi-arid lowland, and more than half of the population under the age of 14.²

One recent example is South Sudan. The humanitarian crisis in South Sudan was considered one of the worst in the world, comparable to the crises in Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia. In addition to the soaring numbers of refugees and IDPs, approximately 40 percent of the population faced severe food shortage, and approximately 75 percent faced some degree of food insecurity. These were the highest levels of famine and food insecurity estimated since the outbreak of the war there in 2013.³

The humanitarian policies of the Middle Eastern countries toward the Horn of Africa's food shortages and famine crisis are quite controversial. On the one hand, there is massive investment in agriculture projects and initiatives.⁴ One of the best-known entrepreneurs in the field of agriculture in Ethiopia is the Saudi-Ethiopian billionaire Sheikh Mohammed Al-Amoudi (although many of his initiatives are rather controversial as well).⁵ On the other hand, since many of the Middle Eastern countries also suffer from issues of food security due to arid lands and climate change, they are making extensive use of fertile lands in several of the Horn of Africa's countries, such as Ethiopia and Sudan. Moreover, some of these lands are purchased by governmental agencies and/or private entrepreneurs through questionable methods.⁶ These processes of exporting agricultural products from the fertile regions of the Horn of Africa contribute to the food shortage that continues to be experienced by many local communities.

Another important sphere of influence exercised by some Middle East African countries is education. As this field is important in particular in Africa, with the youngest population in the world, it could be considered a fertile ground for spreading religious and ideological agendas. Turkish and Iranian educational involvement in many of the Horn's countries demonstrates this problem.

Turkey is exporting its model of Imam Atip Schools, which were prevalent there since the beginning of the Turkish Republic. They combine various degrees of secular and Islamic studies, as well as some Sufi *Naqshbandi* contents. Some of these schools, which were established by the Turkey diyanet Foundation and are under the guardianship of Turkey's Ministry of Education. They provide services to Turkish citizens in foreign countries and to the citizens of neighboring countries. They were founded for example, in Mogadishu, Somalia (the first school, established in 1960 was shut down with the outbreak of the civil war in 1991, and reopened in 2012).⁷ The combination of secular and Islamic studies attracted many young men and women in the violence-torn country, where education opportunities are rare, yet only a few hundred young Somalis are accepted. The Turkish language is also learned there, and the most talented students are eligible for higher education scholarships in Turkey.⁸

In comparison to Turkey, Iranian educational initiatives in the Horn of Africa are much more widespread, even though they do not spread Shi'ism, as Muslims in the Horn's countries are predominantly Sunni. One of the most well-known examples is the Bilal Muslim Mission- a Shi'i Muslim NGO founded in Tanzania in 1963 by the Indian Shi'as of East Africa. It aims to spread Twelver Shi'ism in East Africa and beyond, and to assist Shi'as living in poverty worldwide.⁹ According to Chanfi Ahmed:

"Concerning the Bilal Muslim Mission, we should also consider the impact of Khomeini's Iranian revolution. Although the Bilal Muslim Mission existed before Khomeini (1902-89) came to power in 1979, it is undeniable that the Islamic Republic of Iran, through its embassies and cultural services, managed to gain strong influence within the Bilal Muslim Mission and the Ithna 'ashari khoja community and the Muslims of the East African region in general. Indeed, many of the young Sunni Muslims in the region sympathized with the Islamic revolution. The Iranian embassies and cultural services established their propaganda networks in the region, and at the same time gave support to the Bilal Muslim Mission and any activity of Allama Rizvi who they thought to be the most competent Ithna 'ashari da'i (missionary) the region had ever seen".¹⁰

Tanzania has become one of the most influential centers of Iranian influence in East Africa which is demonstrated by the many branches of the Bilal Muslim Schools. In addition to these important secondary schools, a branch of the Shi'i Mustafa University was established in Dar Es Salaam. As with Turkey, prominent students may receive scholarships to learn in Iran, mostly going to the holy city Qom. The spread of contradictory Islamic messages, Sunni and Shi'i in this case, is adding layers of tension and conflict in the Horn of Africa, an area already characterized by a fragile political, religious and ethnic environment.

From a wider perspective, the effort to formulate a mutual agenda of peace and security in the Horn of Africa has been carried out in the last two decades. The architecture of such cooperation has included many components, such as the development of a common counterterrorism strategy, and the joint handling problems, such as unregulated arms proliferation and trafficking that are threatening the stability of many regions in Africa. One of the characteristics of this multilateral initiative is the effort to try to solve conflicts (mostly intrastate, but also between states) by continental organizations, such as the African Union,¹¹ or regional organizations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). This organization was established in the 1980s to handle ecological issues, yet was transformed later on to mediate in processes of conflict resolution in the Horn of Africa, in particular in Sudan, Somalia, and South Sudan.¹² This transformation was derived from the understanding that the opportunities for political stability and economic growth are inseparable from "regional solutions to regional problems." In the case of the Middle Eastern countries, their motives to assist in this new regional emphasis are convoluted. On the one hand, a more stable region will contribute to stabilizing the Red Sea area as a whole, and would promote also better economic cooperation, among other things. On the other hand, tackling these issues requires commitment to processes of more equal distribution of power and health, which are interwoven with wider processes of democratization, of which both the Middle East and the Horn of Africa regions have a poor record so far.

In conclusion, the growing Middle Eastern interest in the Horn of Africa, a region that has strategic and economic importance, is evident in many aspects that include, among others, humanitarian, agricultural and educational initiatives. Currently, it seems that most of these initiatives tend to serve the interests of the providing

countries rather than the receiving ones. More balanced initiatives in these spheres could benefit both regions, which are struggling with many common vulnerabilities and challenges.

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¹ U.S. Institute of Peace "[Red Sea Rivalries: Middle East Competition in the Horn of Africa](#)," September 20, 2019.

² The Inter-Governmental Authority on Drought and Development ([IGADD](#)).

³ OCHA, [South Sudan Humanitarian Bulletin](#), No. 12, August 7, 2019.

⁴ CRU, "[Mapping the extent of Gulf investments and ODA in the Horn of Africa](#)", Report, April, 2018.

⁵ "[Saudi tycoon provides 55 trucks to drought affected in Ethiopia](#)", *New Business Ethiopia*, April 30, 2017.

⁶ "[Qatar among GCC countries investing in Africa](#)," *Oxford Business Group*, 2015.

⁷ İbrahim Aşlamacı & Recep Kaymakcan, "A model for Islamic education from Turkey: the Imam-Hatip schools", *British Journal of Religious Education*, Vol. 39, No.3, 2016, pp. 279-292.

⁸ Munira Abdelmenan Awel, "[Somalia: Turkish Foundation Schools hosts 500 students](#)," *Anadolu Agency*, January 30, 2018.

⁹ Chanfi Ahmed, "Networks of Islamic NGOs in sub-Saharan Africa: Bilal Muslim Mission, African Muslim Agency (Direct Aid), and al-Haramayn", *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3, November 2009, pp. 426-437.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 434.

¹¹ See, for example, Irit Back, *Sovereignty and Intervention in Africa: Conflict Resolution and International Organizations in Darfur*, (London: I B Tauris, 2015).

¹² Irit Back, *From Sudan to South Sudan: IGAD and the Role of Regional Mediation in Africa*. Accepted for publication by Brill; Sally Healy, "[Peacemaking in the Midst of War: An Assessment of IGAD'S Contribution to Regional Security](#)," *Crisis States Research Centre*, London School of Economics and Political Science, Working Paper no. 59, P. 11.