

**"THE GULF STATES AND THE HORN OF AFRICA:  
INTERESTS, INFLUENCES AND INSTABILITY"  
SUMMARY OF A WEBINAR HELD BY  
ARAB GULF STATES INSTITUTE IN WASHINGTON (AGSIW)  
7 APRIL 2022**



**OVERVIEW**

The AGSIW hosted a webinar discussion moderated by Robert Mason (Non-Resident Fellow, AGSIW; Fellow, Sectarianism, Proxies and De-sectarianisation Project at Lancaster University) that used the opportunity of a book launch regarding relations between the Gulf States and the Horn of Africa to examine the complex interactions between the Gulf Arab states and the countries of the Horn.

The Gulf states' prominent role in the Horn of Africa has garnered substantial attention, from the proliferation of military installations and ports to the increase in military and economic aid and the active role of Gulf countries in attempting to resolve some of the region's most intractable conflicts.

The book entitled, 'The Gulf States and the Horn of Africa'<sup>1</sup> has focussed on the nature of connections between the Gulf and the Horn of Africa, by taking a deep dive into the complexities of power projection, political rivalry, and conflict across the Red Sea and beyond.

Bringing together scholars working on and in both regions, the book considers strategic competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and between the United Arab Emirates and both Qatar and Turkey, along with other international engagement such as joint anti-piracy operations, counterterrorism cooperation, security assistance, base agreements, and economic development.

**INTRODUCTORY REMARKS BY ROBERT MASON**

The thrust of what was discussed by the panellists was about the content of the 11 chapters that comprises the book<sup>2</sup>. This included discussions

---

<sup>1</sup> Edited by Robert Mason and Simon Mabon

<sup>2</sup> *The Gulf States and the Horn of Africa* (320 pages) takes a deep dive into the complexities of power projection, political rivalry and conflict across the Red Sea and beyond. Focusing on the nature of interregional connections between the Gulf and the Horn, it explores the multifaceted nature of relations between states and the two increasingly important subregions. Bringing together scholars working on and in both regions, the book considers strategic competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and between the UAE and both Qatar and Turkey, along with other

concerning all kinds of issues from piracy and terrorism to strategic and economic issues.

Introductory remarks by the moderator, Robert Mason provided a brief history of Gulf State involvement with countries of Africa and the Horn region in particular, going back to the reign of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia 1964-75 and his establishment of the 'Saudi Fund for Development' in 1974.

However, matters were to change dramatically with the start of the Arab uprising in 2011 as well as the start of the conflict in Yemen in 2015. There were other concerns such as the rising suspicion about Iranian engagement in Yemen and around Aden under the pretext of anti-piracy activities that Iran had started to engage in going back 2014 in and around the port of Aden and the Red Sea.

At the same time, the Saudis had established a base in 'Asab' (Eretria) and along with UAE had become quite active in negotiating a halt to hostilities between Ethiopia and Eretria in 2018 (to some extent because of the continuing war in Yemen).

While from 2014-2020, UAE had matched China in terms of its investment in the Horn, that level has since fallen off quite sharply.

Competition between Turkey, Iran, UAE and Saudi Arabia has nonetheless helped in a way the development of real autonomy for some of the regional states.

## **A BRIEF SUMMARY OF SOME COMMENTS ABOUT THE BOOK MADE BY PARTICIPATING PANELLISTS**

1. **Karen E. Young** (*Senior Fellow, Director, Program on Economics and Energy, Middle East Institute*)

- The chapter in the book related to her discusses the UAE's interventionist motives in the Horn.
- It attributes UAE's actions to both "complex realism and economic statecraft". Also, the UAE had come to develop an interest in port

---

international engagement such as joint anti-piracy operations, counterterrorism cooperation, security assistance, base agreements and economic development.

Drawing on a range of subject expertise and field research across case study countries, the volume adds to the sparse literature on the regional and international politics of the Horn of Africa and Red Sea, gleaning specific insights from contemporary reflections across the book. This is essential reading for students and researchers interested in the Horn of Africa and the evolving regional geopolitics of the Gulf.

facilities in the Horn because of its military involvement on the other side in Yemen.

- While there has been a great deal of commitment due to what might be explained as the UAE's needs (e.g., food security and a future market for some of its products like petrochemicals etc.), there has also been a great deal of reversals. While investments say in Ethiopia were high up to 2018, that situation is no longer the case.

## 2. **Umer Karim** (*Visiting Fellow, Royal United Services Institute*)

- Focusing on the political and military links of Turkey and the UAE with the Horn, it was noted that being more interested in economic statecraft, Turkey had focused more of its attention on Somalia where it had also carved a military role by accepting to train Somali forces in areas outside of Mogadishu at a time when other parties were unwilling to do the same.
- Turkey's involvements have created a degree of dependence on Turkey.
- However, recently the Somali president extended his term in office which was due to expire unilaterally with Turkish support much to the disdain of his opponents.
- Such recriminations represent the kind of backlashes which Turkey has also experienced in the course of its various encounters in the Horn.
- Turkey had also been quite close to former President Bashir of Sudan and was interested in gaining port facilities for its navy in Sudan.
- Finally, Turkey has also been involved in Ethiopia's war against the Tigre region and its supply of drones to the Ethiopian government has been a game changer for the Ethiopians in their war efforts for stabilizing a situation that was fast getting out of hand.

## 3. **Simon Mabon** (*Chair in International Politics, Lancaster University; Director, Richardson Institute; Director, Sectarianism, Proxies and De-sectarianisation Project*)

- The Horn is not an isolated political system.
- Great powers, including both Russia and China are most interested in having a prolonged presence along with access to naval facilities in the region.



<https://agsiw.org/associates/umer-karim/>