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The War in Iran

Lessons for African States Hosting Foreign Military Bases

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Abstract

The eruption of "Operation Epic Fury," the joint United States–Israel campaign against Iran launched on February 28, 2026, has exposed a structural vulnerability that African states hosting foreign military bases can no longer ignore. Iran's retaliatory strikes against US installations across nine Gulf states, none party to the conflict, demonstrate that hosting foreign military infrastructure can transform a neutral state into a perceived belligerent. This article argues that the crisis constitutes a policy stress test for African basing arrangements and presents a rare opportunity to renegotiate them around four pillars: security guarantees, consultation rights, strategic autonomy, and regional stability.

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Introduction: A Structural Vulnerability Laid Bare

On February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel launched Operation Epic Fury, a campaign of coordinated military strikes against Iran's nuclear and military infrastructure. Iran's response was immediate and geographically expansive. Ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and Shahed-series drones were fired at US military installations across nine Gulf states: Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Iraq, and Oman. Civilian infrastructure was not spared: oil refineries, airports, and commercial hotels were among the targets struck. The strategic logic of Iran's response was unambiguous: states that host the military assets of a belligerent are, in Iran's calculus, legitimate targets, regardless of their formal posture of non-belligerency (Pamba, 2026). The Gulf precedent holds a direct and urgent mirror to African states that have entered into foreign military basing agreements. If the wealthy, diplomatically sophisticated Gulf monarchies, with layered air defence systems and decades of engagement with American security architecture, found themselves absorbing strikes because of hosting decisions made in a prior era of threat assessment, what does this portend for Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, Eritrea, and other African hosts whose basing arrangements are comparatively rudimentary and whose defensive infrastructure is far more limited?

This article argues that the time for passive acceptance of asymmetric base agreements has passed. It advances a thesis of conditionality: African states must leverage the current moment of geopolitical flux, marked by great power competition, Western military retrenchment, and growing African agency, to demand and codify terms that protect their sovereignty, ensure their security, and preserve the primacy of regional stability. Drawing on the cases of Djibouti, Kenya, and the broader Sahel, this article examines the policy dimensions of each of the four pillars of a renegotiated African foreign base bargain.

The Anatomy of African Military Exposure

Africa is, by contemporary measure, one of the most externally militarised non-combatant regions in the world. At least thirteen foreign powers maintain military presence on the continent. The United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), alone, operates across a network of at least twenty confirmed outposts in addition to its principal installation, Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, plus additional co-located sites at host-nation facilities in countries such as Uganda and Senegal (Turse, 2020). Internal AFRICOM documents reviewed by investigative journalists identified 34 sites in 2018, though subsequent consolidation and the closure of some contingency locations has reduced that number; congressional testimony has revealed persistent transparency deficits in AFRICOM's public accounting of its African footprint (The Intercept, 2023). The United States is not alone. China, France, Japan, Italy, Germany, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and the United Kingdom all maintain military facilities or access arrangements across African territory. The Horn of Africa is the epicentre of this competition: with over eleven foreign military bases—the precise count varying by definitional threshold— it represents, on a per capita and per square kilometre basis, one of the densest concentrations of foreign military infrastructure anywhere on earth (Pamba, 2026). Djibouti, with a population of approximately one million people, hosts at least eight foreign military bases, including the United States' Camp Lemonnier, China's People's Liberation Army Support Base—Beijing's first overseas military installation, and facilities maintained by France, Japan, Italy, Saudi Arabia, and Germany.

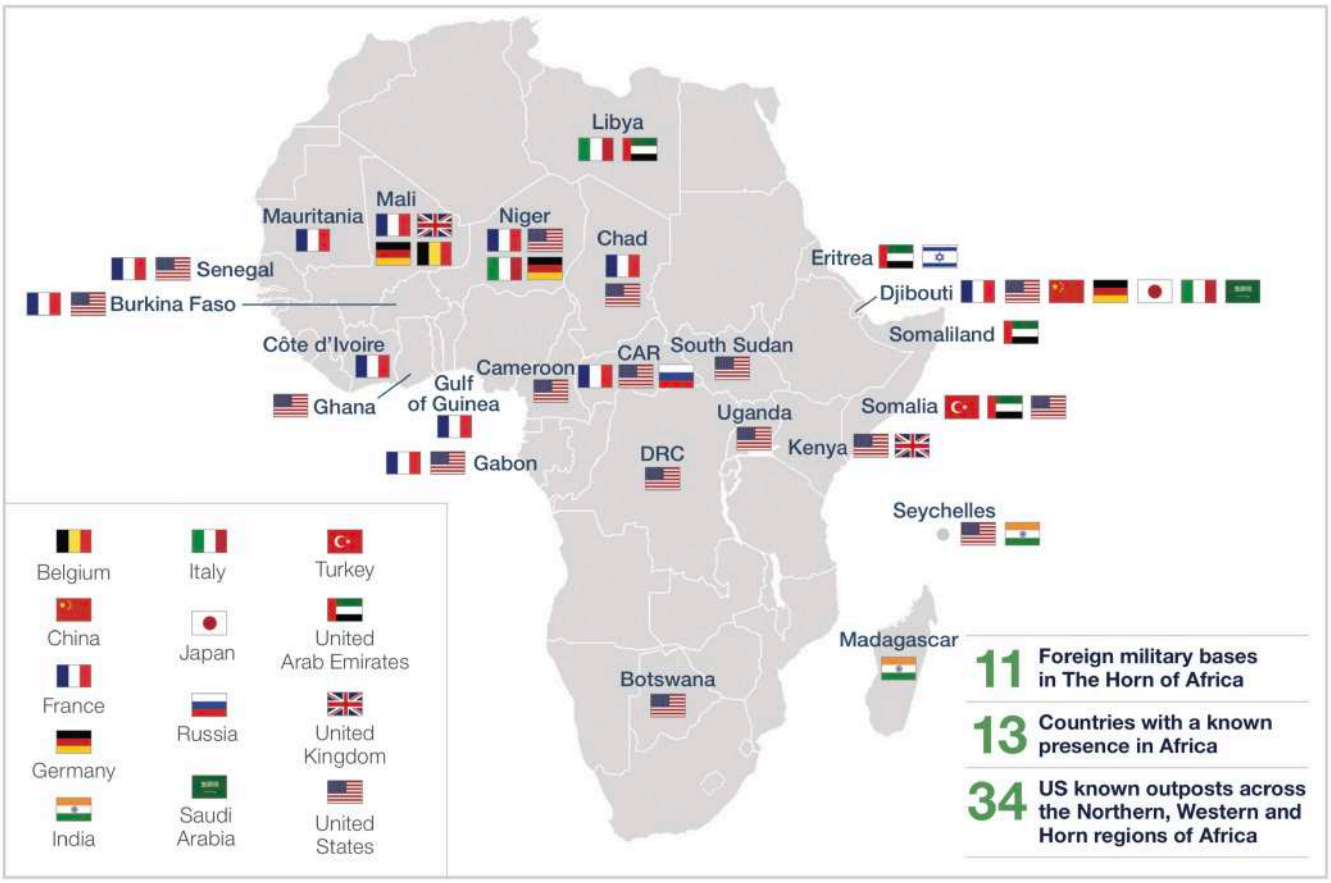
The economic dimensions of this arrangement are significant. The United States pays approximately USD 70 million annually to Djibouti for the Camp Lemonnier lease, with the total American financial contribution including construction, employment of Djiboutian nationals, procurement, and various assistance programmes considerably exceeding that figure (History Rise, 2025). France and China each contribute approximately USD 30 million, with Japan, Italy, and other smaller presences bringing the aggregate annual revenue from foreign military bases to well above USD 200 million, a figure that represents an outsized share of Djibouti's sovereign revenue in an economy nominally valued at approximately USD 4.67 billion (Responsible Statecraft, 2025; Ali et al., 2025). For Djibouti, with an external public debt that has risen from 35 percent of GDP to 68 percent, largely attributable to Chinese infrastructure lending, the base economy is not merely a supplement but a fiscal pillar (Congressional Research Service, 2025). Yet economic dependency of this kind generates precisely the leverage asymmetries that make genuine renegotiation difficult. African host states have historically entered basing agreements from positions of fiscal necessity, with limited legal and technical capacity to assess the full strategic implications of the terms

they accepted. The current moment of great power competition has paradoxically created new bargaining leverage, as multiple competing powers seek access, but this leverage remains largely unexploited in the absence of continental-level frameworks to support individual states.

The Proxy Belligerency Risk: A Structural Problem

The framing of the Gulf crisis as an exceptional geopolitical event obscures its more fundamental lesson: the exposure of foreign military base host states is not a contingent product of any particular conflict but a structural feature of the base-hosting relationship itself. Iran's decision to strike Gulf host states was not born of an error in strategic calculation, it reflected a deliberate coercive logic applied consistently to the geography of military deployment. Africa's own history offers a parallel that requires no abstraction. The UAE's initial base in Eritrea, established in 2015, was used extensively in the Saudi-led coalition campaign against Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen. This created an adversarial relationship between Eritrea and both Iran and the Houthi movement, a relationship that Asmara did not author through any sovereign act of policy, but inherited through the transactional terms of a base agreement with Abu Dhabi (Pamba, 2026). Kenya's Camp Simba at Manda Bay in Lamu County has been a launch platform for US surveillance and strike missions against al-Shabaab targets in Somalia. On January 5, 2020, approximately 30 to 40 al-Shabaab fighters attacked Camp Simba in a coordinated pre-dawn assault that killed three Americans, Army Specialist Henry Mayfield Jr., and two Department of Defense contractors, and destroyed seven aircraft, including a US Special Operations Command intelligence aircraft (US Department of Defense, 2022).

The 2020 Manda Bay attack was, critically, not an attack on Kenya in any meaningful sovereign sense. It was an attack on a foreign military installation operating from Kenyan territory. Kenya became a target not because of anything Nairobi decided, but because it provided the real estate from which others made decisions. Pentagon reviews of the attack found systemic failures, a culture of complacency, inadequate threat assessment, insufficient force protection, that were entirely internal



Map of Africa, showing the presence of 58 foreign military operations and bases, with the United States leading with 34 spread across the continent. (Photo Credit: ISS)

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to the US military chain of command (VOA News, 2022; DefenceWeb, 2022). Kenya bore the reputational and security costs of an event over which it exercised no operational control. This is the structural logic of proxy exposure, and it is not limited to non-state threats. As Iran has demonstrated in the Gulf, state actors can apply the same logic with vastly greater destructive capability. Djibouti, to its credit, has demonstrated awareness of this dynamic. Its refusal to host a Russian naval base, citing the risk of becoming a terrain of proxy confrontation between great powers, reflects a coherent application of strategic restraint (Pamba, 2026). Equally instructive is Djibouti's refusal, reported in 2024–2025, to permit the United States to use its territory for strikes against Houthi forces in Yemen, a decision that cost Djibouti political capital in Washington but preserved the operational neutrality that allows it to simultaneously host American, Chinese, French, and Japanese military installations without becoming a flashpoint (Responsible Statecraft, 2025).

The Four Pillars of a Renegotiated African Base Bargain

a. Comprehensive Security Guarantees and Defensive Capability Transfer

The Gulf crisis revealed a stark asymmetry between what base-owning states invest in protecting their own installations and what they invest in the host state's sovereign defensive capacity. Qatar's Al Udeid Air Base, the largest US air base in the Middle East, absorbed Iranian strikes with the protection of Patriot missile batteries, Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) systems, integrated radar networks, cyber-intelligence infrastructure, and coalition-coordinated interception architecture built up over decades of investment. The base survived. Qatar's civilian population also survived, in part because of the layered defensive bubble that US investment had erected primarily to protect US interests. African base-hosting states have no comparable arrangement. Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, despite hosting approximately 4,000 US and allied personnel and serving as the operational hub for counterterrorism missions across East Africa and Yemen, does not sit within a defensive architecture that extends meaningfully to the protection of Djibouti City or Djiboutian civilian infrastructure (Ali et al., 2025). The same is true of Camp Simba in Kenya, where the 2020 attack exposed not only a culture of complacency among US forces but the near-total absence of integrated host-nation defensive systems.

The policy implication is clear. African states must negotiate base agreements that include formal, treaty-level mutual defence commitments; real-time intelligence sharing on threats directed at or emanating from base installations; the deployment of air and missile defence systems that provide coverage to adjacent civilian and governmental infrastructure; and technology transfer arrangements that over time build indigenous defensive capacity rather than perpetuating indefinite dependency. Kenya's recent acquisition of the Spyder air defence system, financed through an Israeli government loan valued at approximately USD 27.1 million, represents a modest step in this direction, though it falls well short of the kind of comprehensive defensive architecture that the Gulf experience suggests is necessary (Prism Reports, 2025). The security guarantee pillar also has a temporal dimension. Base agreements that are structured as straightforward lease-and-rent transactions, as Camp Lemonnier's arrangement has largely been, provide no mechanism for host states to secure ongoing defensive support as the threat environment evolves. Renegotiated agreements must include review clauses that trigger reassessment of defensive commitments when the threat context changes materially, including when the base-owning state undertakes operations that foreseeably escalate adversarial attention to the host.

b. Meaningful Prior Consultation and Host-State Consent for Operational Decisions

Perhaps the most consequential asymmetry in existing African base agreements is the gap in consultation. Operation Epic Fury was launched without substantive prior notice to Gulf host states; by most accounts, those states scrambled to close airspace, alert populations,

and activate air defence systems when strikes began on February 28, 2026, despite weeks of US-Iran diplomatic engagement that had created a public impression that military action remained a distant contingency (Pamba, 2026). For African base hosts, the consultation gap is likely wider still. The operational activities of AFRICOM, including drone strikes in Somalia, special operations raids in the Sahel, and intelligence missions across East Africa, have not, as a rule, been subject to formal prior notification to host governments, let alone consent. The 2020 Manda Bay attack occurred in the context of ongoing AFRICOM air operations from Kenyan territory against al-Shabaab; there is no public evidence that Kenya was consulted on the escalatory trajectory of those operations or their foreseeable consequences for Kenya's threat exposure. The independent Pentagon review of the attack found systemic communication failures within the US chain of command; the possibility of parallel failures in host-nation communication was not, within the scope of those reviews, given comparable scrutiny (US DoD, 2022).

The policy prescription is not a veto on all base operations, such a condition would be operationally unworkable and would not survive the negotiating table. Rather, it is a graduated framework of consultative obligations calibrated to operational significance. Routine logistical and training activities require notification but not consent. Operations that involve the use of lethal force, or that have a foreseeable potential to generate adversarial attention to the host state, require prior briefing and the opportunity for the host government to raise objections or impose conditions. Operations that involve the projection of force against a state actor with documented retaliatory intent, the category most directly implicated by the Gulf precedent, require explicit host-state consent. The legal architecture for this exists. Status of Forces Agreements (SOFAs) and bilateral defence cooperation agreements are negotiable instruments, not fixed templates. The challenge is that most African states have signed these agreements from positions of limited legal and technical capacity. The African Union's 2016 call for member states to be 'circumspect' in subscribing to foreign base agreements acknowledged the risk but did not provide the institutional support, legal templates, negotiating capacity-building, model SOFA provisions, that would translate that caution into enforceable terms. Filling this institutional gap is a continental-level policy priority.

c. Codified Strategic Autonomy and the Right of Operational Suspension

The Gulf crisis has produced one of the more striking contemporary demonstrations of strategic autonomy in action. Despite hosting the very bases from which US strikes against Iran have been conducted, and despite sustaining Iranian missile and drone attacks on their own territory, the Gulf states have maintained a studied policy of non-participation in offensive operations. They condemned Iran's retaliatory strikes, they activated their air defence systems, but they declined against considerable American pressure to join offensive operations against Iran (Pamba, 2026). This is not passivity; it is a disciplined assertion of the limits of the basing relationship. African states should aspire to the same quality of codified autonomy. The Gulf states could maintain this posture in part because their basing agreements, renegotiated over decades of post-Cold War strategic engagement, contain explicit non-combat clauses, clear definitions of permitted operational scope, and the political credibility that comes from membership in a functional regional security architecture, the Gulf Cooperation Council, that provides diplomatic cover for positions that deviate from base-owner preferences.

African states lack these institutional supports. The African Union's (AU) Peace and Security Council has not developed binding continental norms on base-hosting terms. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the primary regional security body for the Horn of Africa, has not engaged systematically with the terms of bilateral basing arrangements. The result is that individual African governments negotiate in isolation, without the leverage of collective frameworks and without the political capital that regional backing would provide.

Codified strategic autonomy in the context of base agreements must include several specific provisions. First, an explicit operational scope clause that defines permissible uses of the base and requires renegotiation for uses beyond the agreed scope. The UAE's Assab facility in Eritrea was used for Yemen operations, a use that exposed Eritrea to adversarial attention from Iran and the Houthis, in circumstances that may or may not have been within the original contemplated scope of the base agreement. Explicit scope limits, with enforcement mechanisms, would create a legal basis for Eritrea to have required renegotiation before that exposure was created. Second, a suspension right, a codified host-state authority

Camp Lemonnier, a United States Naval Expeditionary Base in Djibouti. home to the Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) under the United States Africa Command. (Photo Credit: DVIDS)

to order the temporary suspension of specified base operations when in the host government's reasonable assessment, those operations create disproportionate risk to civilian populations or regional stability. Third, a right of political non-attribution, by which the host state is formally not treated as a party to operations conducted from its territory by foreign forces, with base-owning states obligated to communicate this distinction publicly when relevant.

d. The Primacy of Regional Order and Stability

The fourth pillar of a renegotiated base bargain is the most abstract but in some ways the most consequential. It asserts that the terms of any base agreement must be subordinate to the preservation of regional peace and stability, not as a rhetorical aspiration, but as an operational constraint with practical effect. This principle has been partially vindicated by Djibouti's evolving practice of what scholars have characterised as 'omnidirectional hedging', maintaining balanced relationships with competing foreign powers as a strategy for preserving sovereignty and regional relevance (Silaen et al., 2025). By hosting both China and the United States, and by refusing to allow either power to use Djiboutian territory for operations directed against the other's interests, Djibouti has sustained a model of base-hosting that, imperfect as it is, has preserved its strategic neutrality. Notably, when Djibouti refused to permit US anti-Houthi operations from its territory, this decision was grounded precisely in the primacy of regional stability: the Houthi conflict, and the risk of retaliatory strikes, posed an existential threat to Djibouti City and to the commercial shipping traffic on which Djibouti's economy depends (Responsible Statecraft, 2025). The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, through which approximately 25 percent of global seaborne oil transits annually, is Djibouti's principal strategic and economic asset; operations that risked turning that chokepoint into a conflict zone were incompatible with Djibouti's national interest regardless of their compatibility with US strategic preferences (Mashariki Research and Policy Centre, 2025).

The practical institutionalisation of this principle requires African states to embed it in base agreement language, as a general limiting clause that conditions all operational uses of base infrastructure on their consistency with the host state's obligations under the African Union's constitutive act, IGAD's security architecture, and relevant UN Security Council mandates. It also requires African states to develop and publicise clear national security doctrines that articulate the limits of base use they will accept, creating political accountability structures that make departures from those limits politically costly for base-owning states.

The Political Economy of Renegotiation: Opportunities and Constraints

Pamba (2026) rightly identifies the current moment as a rare geopolitical window for African states to renegotiate base terms. Several structural developments converge to create this opportunity. The first is the wave of French military withdrawals from West and Central Africa, driven by a combination of anti-French public sentiment, post-coup military government decisions, and French strategic retrenchment. France has withdrawn from Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Ivory Coast, and Senegal within the span of approximately two years (2022–2025). By the end of 2025, French military presence on the continent was effectively limited to Djibouti and Gabon (Anadolu Agency, 2025; The Conversation, 2025). This represents a dramatic contraction of a military presence that had totalled approximately 20,000 pre-positioned troops in 1970 and still comprised 6,000 as recently as 2022 (The Conversation, 2025). The mechanism of this withdrawal is instructive. In most cases, it was not the result of principled renegotiation but of abrupt unilateral termination by host states following coups or elections that brought to power governments with strong anti-colonial mandates. Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad all terminated their defence cooperation agreements unilaterally, in some cases within weeks of regime change (Anadolu Agency, 2025; France 24, 2025; Harvard International Review, 2025). The political and security consequences of these abrupt terminations, including the rapid backfilling of vacated French positions by Russian mercenaries, and the acceleration of jihadist territorial gains in the Sahel, underscore the risks of unmanaged withdrawal. They also demonstrate, conversely, that deliberate, structured renegotiation from a position of strategic clarity is far preferable to reactive termination under duress.

The second structural development creating a renegotiation window is the intensification of great power competition for African base access, which increases the bargaining leverage of host states. US Africa Command has been seeking alternative drone and logistics base locations following its expulsion from Niger's Agadez drone base in 2024 (Harvard International Review, 2025; The Intercept, 2023). The US military's plans, documented in internal AFRICOM construction documents totalling more than USD 330 million in projected spending from 2021 to 2025, reflect a long-term commitment to the African basing architecture that creates leverage for host states in renewal negotiations (Mail & Guardian, 2020). China's continued interest in expanding maritime access around the Red Sea and Indian Ocean littoral, including reported negotiations around Berbera in Somaliland and Bosaso in Puntland, creates competitive pressure that African states with existing Chinese bases can use in negotiations with Western partners.

Institutional Constraints and the Need for a Continental Framework

The constraints on renegotiation are equally structural. The most significant is the absence of a continental framework for base-hosting norms. The African Union's 2016 call for circumspection was advisory; it generated no binding legal architecture, no model agreement provisions, no continental negotiating support mechanism. Individual African states continue to negotiate bilaterally with far more powerful counterparts, typically in contexts of fiscal dependency, Camp Lemonnier's annual rent of USD 70 million represents a substantial fraction of Djibouti's government revenue, that constrain assertiveness (Silaen et al., 2025; Ali et al., 2025). The Gulf Cooperation Council's institutional infrastructure, collective security commitments, joint air defence planning, coordinated diplomatic postures, provided Gulf host states with a framework within which to maintain the strategic restraint described above. African states, particularly in the Horn of Africa, lack an equivalent. IGAD has relevant mandate and geographic scope, but limited institutional capacity and a membership that includes states with competing strategic relationships, Djibouti hosts both Chinese and American bases; Eritrea's Assab base involvement in Yemen generated tensions with Ethiopia—that complicate the development of consensus norms. The

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African Union's Peace and Security Council has the continental mandate but limited enforcement authority over bilateral agreements between member states and non-African powers.

Filling this institutional gap should be a priority for both the African Union and IGAD. A continental model SOFA, developed collaboratively, with legal and technical input from member states, and incorporating the four pillars advanced in this article, would provide individual states with a negotiating template that reduces the asymmetry of bilateral engagements. Regional review mechanisms, by which proposed base agreements or renewals are subject to peer assessment against agreed criteria, would create accountability without infringing on sovereign decision-making.

Case Studies in Strategic Exposure and Agency

Djibouti's foreign basing model, often characterised as a strategy of 'small state diplomacy' or omnidirectional hedging, represents the most sophisticated instantiation of African base-hosting agency on the continent. By hosting multiple powers simultaneously, including strategic rivals, President Ismail Omar Guelleh's government has diversified its security guarantees and extracted maximum economic rent from its geostrategic position. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, through which 15,000 ships transit annually, and control of which was rendered dramatically more consequential by the Houthi-driven reduction in Red Sea container traffic of up to 80 per cent in some months of 2024 (Mashariki Research and Policy Centre, 2025), has made Djibouti genuinely indispensable to multiple powers simultaneously.

The results are tangible. Anti-piracy operations coordinated from Djibouti-based installations reduced piracy incidents in the Gulf of Aden from 163 in 2011 to fewer than 10 annually by 2020 (Mashariki Research and Policy Centre, 2025). China's USD 14.4 billion in infrastructure investment, including the Djibouti International Free Trade Zone projected to be Africa's largest, a railway to Addis Ababa, and a water pipeline from Ethiopia, has transformed Djibouti's physical infrastructure and generated approximately 15,000 jobs (Responsible Statecraft, 2025). China-Djibouti trade exceeded USD 3 billion in 2024, compared to only USD 185 million with the United States (History Rise, 2025).

Yet the model's limits are also instructive. Djibouti's public debt has risen to 68 percent of GDP, with Chinese institutions holding over half of its USD 2.6 billion in external debt obligations (Congressional Research Service, 2025). This debt dynamic has created a different form of dependency, one that constrains Djibouti's sovereign manoeuvring even as it maintains the appearance of multi-alignment. The Congressional Research Service has flagged this as a significant vulnerability, noting that US diplomats regard Djibouti as being 'on the front lines of US strategic competition with China' (Congressional Research Service, 2025). Djibouti's ability to maintain genuine neutrality, demonstrated in its refusal to permit anti-Houthi operations, is thus perpetually in tension with the leverage that debt-holding powers exercise quietly through financial rather than military means. The policy lesson for Djibouti, and for other African states contemplating the multi-alignment model, is that strategic autonomy requires not only diversified basing arrangements but also diversified economic relationships and reduced fiscal dependency on base revenue. Djibouti's stated aspiration of becoming 'the next Singapore', a global logistics hub that transcends dependence on military rents, represents the correct long-term strategic direction, though it faces the formidable constraints of a small population, limited human capital, and a harsh physical environment (History Rise, 2025).

Kenya: The Costs of Unmanaged Exposure

Kenya's experience at Camp Simba represents the sharpest contemporary example of the costs of base-hosting arrangements that lack the four pillars advanced in this article. The January 5, 2020 al-Shabaab attack killed three Americans, destroyed seven aircraft including a SOCOM intelligence platform, and exposed

fundamental weaknesses in both US force protection and host-nation integration (US DoD, 2022). Pentagon reviews found a 'deeply rooted culture of a false sense of security' among US personnel, inadequate threat assessment, and systemic failures across multiple echelons of command (VOA News, 2022; DefenceWeb, 2022). From Kenya's perspective, the attack demonstrated proxy exposure in its most direct form: the base was a launch point for surveillance and strike missions against al-Shabaab in Somalia, missions for which Kenya was not the operational authority but over whose strategic consequences it bore the territorial risk. Al-Shabaab's motivation was explicitly linked to the US operations conducted from Kenyan soil. The attacking fighters had conducted months of reconnaissance; the attack was planned and resourced, not opportunistic (The Elephant, 2023). Kenya's territory had become a legitimate military target, in al-Shabaab's operational planning, precisely because of the base's operational role.

The diplomatic dimension is equally instructive. Kenya has hosted British bases since independence in 1963, and has maintained a generally cooperative posture with both UK and US military presences. Yet there is no public evidence of a formal consultation framework by which Kenya was briefed on the escalatory trajectory of AFRICOM operations from Manda Bay, or given the opportunity to raise concerns about operations that foreseeably increased Kenya's threat exposure. The Camp Simba attack occurred three weeks after the US assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, a moment of peak retaliatory risk and while al-Shabaab denied any link to Iranian directives, the temporal proximity of the attack and its targeting of a US ISR platform are consistent with a threat environment that Kenya's government arguably deserved prior notification about.

The US Department of State's Country Reports on Terrorism 2020 acknowledged the attack's significance as 'the most notable attack' of the year in Kenya, but framed it in terms of al-Shabaab's capabilities rather than the structural conditions of host-state exposure (US Department of State, 2020). In the aftermath, the US made extensive security upgrades at Manda Bay, increasing the protection force size by more than double, installing fencing around the entire perimeter, overhauling intelligence-sharing protocols, and improving air force security training (DefenceWeb, 2022). These were improvements to US force protection. The policy question this article raises is whether equivalent investments were made in Kenya's own defensive capacity, in the kind of integrated air surveillance, early warning systems, and joint command structures that would give Kenya real situational awareness about the threat environment generated by operations from its territory.

The Sahel: The Lessons of Abrupt Retrenchment

The Sahel case studies—Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and to a lesser extent Chad and Senegal—, offer a cautionary tale about the consequences of base relationships that lose their political legitimacy. France's Operation Barkhane deployed approximately 5,000 troops across the G5 Sahel countries from 2014, conducting counterterrorism operations against jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (Al Jazeera, 2023). Yet by 2025, France had been expelled from virtually every Sahelian country, with its military presence reduced to Djibouti and Gabon (Anadolu Agency, 2025).

The mechanism of expulsion was not primarily military failure, though Operation Barkhane's inability to suppress the Sahelian jihadist insurgency was a contributing factor. It was political delegitimization, driven by perceptions of neo-colonialism, allegations (denied by France) that French forces had tolerated or enabled jihadist movements to protect French mining and energy interests, and the instrumentalization of anti-French sentiment by coup leaders who found in France's military presence a politically useful target (France 24, 2025; ECFR, 2025). The post-French security vacuum has been partially filled by Russian mercenaries whose record of civilian protection has been significantly worse, a fact that underscores the distinction between the desirability of security partnerships and the terms on which they are conducted. Senegalese President Bassirou Diomaye Faye's December 31, 2024 announcement that all foreign military bases in Senegal would close by 2025, delivered alongside Ivory Coast's announcement of the handover of France's Abidjan base, represents a more principled instantiation of the same impulse (The Conversation, 2025). Unlike the post-coup expulsions, Senegal's decision was taken by an elected government acting on a democratic mandate, and it was framed in terms of sovereignty rather than anti-French animus. This is precisely the kind of assertion of codified strategic autonomy this article advocates, though its implementation will require careful management of the transition to avoid the security vacuums that have marked abrupt expulsions elsewhere.

Policy Recommendations

Drawing together the analytical threads of this article, the following policy recommendations are directed at three levels: African host states individually, the African Union and IGAD institutionally, and the international community normatively.

For African Host States

- Conduct a systematic threat reassessment of existing base agreements against the Gulf precedent. Each host state should formally evaluate the foreseeable adversarial attention generated by current base operations, the defensive infrastructure available to protect civilian populations and critical infrastructure, and the adequacy of existing consultation mechanisms.
- Initiate renegotiation of base agreements to incorporate the four pillars advanced in this article: security guarantees, consultation rights, strategic autonomy clauses, and regional stability primacy provisions. Renegotiation should be presented not as hostility to base-owning states but as a maturation of the partnership, a transition from transactional lease arrangements to structured strategic relationships consistent with modern norms of sovereignty.
- Develop and publicise national security doctrines that clearly articulate the conditions under which base operations are and are not consistent with the host state's national interests and regional obligations. Such doctrines create political accountability, reduce the scope for ambiguity exploitation by base-owning states, and strengthen the host state's negotiating position in future renewals.

> The US-Israel campaign against Iran, and Iran's retaliatory strikes against Gulf base host states, have produced the most consequential live demonstration of foreign military base exposure risk in the contemporary era

For the African Union and IGAD

- The African Union's Peace and Security Council should commission the development of a Model Status of Forces Agreement incorporating the four pillars identified in this article, with technical support from the African Union Commission and regional legal institutions.
- IGAD should convene a dedicated Horn of Africa Foreign Military Bases Review Process, bringing together member states hosting foreign installations to develop shared norms and mutual support mechanisms.
- Both institutions should engage with the question of how regional economic community membership can provide diplomatic cover and political leverage for individual states asserting the terms of base agreements, replicating, to the extent possible, the Gulf Cooperation Council function that underpinned Gulf states' strategic restraint.

Conclusion

The US-Israel campaign against Iran, and Iran's retaliatory strikes against Gulf base host states, have produced the most consequential live demonstration of foreign military base exposure risk in the contemporary era. The Gulf states, with their wealth, their layered defensive systems, and their sophisticated diplomatic positioning, have managed the immediate crisis, though not without significant civilian infrastructure damage and profound disruption to regional stability. African states in analogous positions of base-hosting, with far more limited defensive resources and far more asymmetric negotiating relationships, face the same structural risks with far fewer of the mitigating advantages. This article has argued that the current moment of geopolitical flux, characterised by the reshaping of Western military postures in Africa, intensifying great power competition for African base access, and growing African political agency in sovereign decision-making, represents a rare and time-limited window for African states to renegotiate the terms of their base agreements. The four pillars of a renegotiated bargain, comprehensive security guarantees, meaningful consultation rights, codified strategic autonomy, and the primacy of regional stability, are not demands for the termination of security partnerships. They are

the minimum conditions for those partnerships to be genuinely mutual, genuinely protective of African interests, and genuinely compatible with the sovereignty that African states have fought, and continue to fight, to exercise meaningfully. The window is open. The question is whether African states, individually and collectively, have the institutional capacity, the political will, and the strategic clarity to step through it, before the next conflict makes the case for them, at far greater cost.

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Stopping the Bleeding in Sudan: The Strategic Value of Localized Ceasefires in a Fragmented Conflict

By Mutasim A. Ali , Ph.D

Abstract

As the conflict in Sudan enters its fourth year, with no viable political or military resolution in sight, the discussion on the reduction of violence or cessation of hostilities cannot be more urgent. The conflict has made Sudan the world's largest humanitarian and displacement crisis for three consecutive years. In the recent past, the warring parties were united in committing mass atrocities across Sudan and suppressing pro-democracy protests, but they are now vying for power and control of the economy. This article examines a new approach to stop the bleeding in Sudan and de-escalate violence. As the warring parties continue to deploy advanced technologies and weaponry, international and regional stakeholders must focus on the cessation of hostilities rather than peace negotiations, beginning with localized ceasefires. Such an undertaking is particularly crucial in areas where the propensity for mass atrocities is heightened, given the historical context. Negotiations on peace, as I argue, require specific prerequisites, such as the provision of physical security, and must be devised by the Sudanese people with the maximum possible degree of participation to depart from Sudan's gloomy past and present toward a peaceful future.

Introduction

Since April 2023, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary group formerly known as Janjaweed, have been engaged in a brutal and devastating conflict. The warring parties' joint responsibility for suppressing peaceful protests during the interim period (2019-2022) and their involvement in atrocities across Sudan has finally come to an end, as each has taken separate ways in committing crimes against Sudanese civilians. Both the SAF and the RSF showed a complete disregard for human life and the basic principles of protecting the Sudanese people. In recent months, the conflict has laid bare the destructive influence of external actors, as both the SAF and the RSF have escalated their campaigns with increasingly advanced technologies and weaponry. According to a conservative estimate, the war claimed the lives of more than 150,000 Sudanese, with over nine million people forced to leave their homes (SEMAFOR Africa, 2026). The warring parties continue to commit egregious human rights abuses against civilians, described as a "war on civilians" (Asi, 2025). Rape and sexual violence, summary executions, hostage-taking, arbitrary detention, and enforced disappearances are used as weapons of war (U.N. Doc, 2024); (Committee for Justice & AWAFY Sudanese Organization, 2026). These violations are classified as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and in some instances even genocide (Ali & Diamond, 2024); (U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2026); (U.N. Doc, 2026). Perpetrators continue to commit these atrocities with no real consequences. As a result of the war, more than two-thirds of the Sudanese are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, making Sudan the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today (U.N. Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025). In July 2024, the United Nations Famine Review Committee confirmed famine in Darfur and Kordofan, compounding the impact of the war on Sudanese civilians (IPC, 2025).

The discussion on reducing violence and ending hostilities arises from the persistent failure of attempts to resolve the conflict between the warring parties, as Sudanese civilians continue to bear the brunt of the suffering. This discourse is not only academic but also holds a political and humanitarian significance. The emphasis on localized ceasefires to mitigate violence may contribute to the broader objective of achieving a lasting peace. Notably, a lasting peace process should be inclusive of all stakeholders, not just the warring parties. The

SPLM formed in 1983 following the Sudan government's abandonment of the Addis Ababa Agreement, marking a turning point in the struggle for Southern Sudan's political and social future (Photo Credit: The New Vision)

absence of such participation risks resulting in bilateral and transactional agreements that primarily cater to the interests of the most powerful parties, disregarding the well-being of civilians.

The international community and the African Union (AU) has remained largely inactive, if not absent. Sudanese civilians have been left to fend for themselves, bearing the brunt of the devastating consequences of the war against them. Beyond the massive destruction, the conflict in Sudan has now spread to threaten the stability of the Greater Horn region, with Ethiopia and South Sudan currently facing imminent threats of sliding into violence.

Against this backdrop, the article explores new possibilities for reducing violence and building trust, eventually leading to a genuinely Sudanese-led peace process. Sudan's ongoing conflict should be viewed as an opportunity to break free from the nation's gloomy history of recurring peace-making failures (Ali M. A., 2024). This alternative is only feasible through an inclusive and participatory process devised by the Sudanese people themselves. External actors lack the authority to shape a nation's destiny, and therefore, relying on the international community to bring about peace is not only ineffective but also potentially counter-productive.

Contextualizing Peace-Making in Sudan

Sudan has endured over seven decades of armed conflicts and political instability. The underlying cause of these conflicts lies in the deliberate strategy charted by a select few to impose a hegemonic Islamic and Arabic identity upon a vastly diverse state. In repeated attempts to resolve conflicts, subsequent Sudanese regimes have consistently resorted to bilateral, transactional peace agreements that ultimately failed to establish lasting peace. These agreements are often signed for tactical reasons rather than a genuine interest in peace and political stability (Alier, 1991). Among the most significant agreements in this context are the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, which temporarily halted the first civil war in Sudan between the government of Sudan and the Southern Sudan Liberation Movement; the 1997 Khartoum Peace Agreement, which facilitated a resolution of conflict between the government of Sudan and the South Sudan United Democratic Salvation Front; and the 2005 Naivasha Peace Agreement, which brought an end to the conflict between the government of Sudan and the Sudanese Peoples' Liberation Movement/Army, leading to the separation of Southern Sudan in 2011. Further agreements include the 2006 Abuja Peace Agreement, which established a framework for peace between the government of Sudan and a splinter faction of the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army; the 2011

Doha Document for Peace in Darfur, which aimed to address the conflict in Darfur between the government of Sudan and various Darfur armed movements; and the most recent agreement, the 2019 political pact between the Transitional Military Council and political parties representing pro-democracy protesters (Addis Ababa Agreement, 1972; Khartoum Peace Agreement, 1997; CPA, 2005; Abuja Peace Agreement, 2006; Doha Document for Peace in Darfur, 2011) (Political Agreement Between the Military Council and the Forces of Freedom and Change, 2019). This agreement established an interim period following the overthrow of Islamists, who had imposed three decades of oppression and terrorism. Later in 2020, the Juba Peace Agreement was signed between the Transitional government and armed movements (Juba Peace Agreement, 2020).

It is in this context that the war in April 2023 should be understood as a continuation of an approach that has repeatedly proven to be unsuccessful. Sudan's experience with these bilateral peace accords has led to a widespread perception that all Sudanese conflicts were resolved through peace agreements. While this assertion is partially correct, it overlooks the fact that these agreements did not break the cycle of conflict and violence in Sudan. Therefore, it is plausible to assert that the absence of a lasting peace in Sudan can be attributed to these types of agreements.

International Stakeholders' Peace Efforts: A Fragmented Terrain

Efforts to end hostilities in Sudan began in the first month with the Saudi-American initiative. In May 2023, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), along with the United States, convened the warring parties in Jeddah and signed the Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan (Jeddah Declaration of Commitment, 2023). Despite the SAF and RSF's failure to uphold their obligations under the Declaration, the initiative remains the only viable and serious pathway to reducing violence in Sudan. Its emphasis on respecting their armed conduct and civilian lives, rather than encompassing a broader peace process, sets it apart from all other initiatives. The parties explicitly stated, "We acknowledge that the commitment to the Declaration of Commitment will not alter any legal, security, or political status of the parties signing it, nor will it be associated with participation in any political process." As I assert, this framing is essential to prevent past failures. A genuine peace process demands the broader participation of the Sudanese people. For this to occur, specific conditions must be fulfilled to ensure meaningful participation by the Sudanese, especially women, youth, and displaced persons. These conditions include, among other things, the provision of physical security to the Sudanese civilians. This will ensure that a new peace agreement will not result in a power-sharing arrangement between powerful armed actors or the political elite. The Jeddah initiative, however, is dented by a lack of a well-defined implementation and enforcement mechanism, which ultimately contributed to its failure. As discussed in the following sections, the opportunity to revive the Jeddah initiative remains still if certain reforms are introduced.

In addition to the Jeddah initiative, there are a few other attempts with varying objectives that reflect the role of external actors involved. One that warrants a particular mention is the Quad, a self-appointed group comprising the United States, the KSA, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. It is convened by the United States, largely because of its significant involvement in the conflict, providing material and political support to the warring parties. The U.S. Administration's strategy appears to be that, for the war to end, the Quad members must negotiate their interests first. The objective is for the Quad members to use their political and economic leverage to pressure the warring parties into negotiations.

Early this year, the Quintet group, comprising the United Nations (UN), the AU, the Arab League, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, was established to support the efforts to end hostilities and facilitate dialogue and political transition (U.N. Secretary-General, 2026). All these forums, while they include important actors, have little chance of ending violence and restoring democratic transition in Sudan. For the Quad, the geopolitical rivalry among its members, coupled with some directly contributing to the conflict, renders the group ineffective. On its part, the Quintet

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comprises major regional organizations that have played a key role in numerous Sudan's peace agreements. However, their primary focus on facilitating political dialogue and restoring democratic transitions may not be as pertinent at this time.

Reframing Sequencing: Peace vs. Ceasefire

As demonstrated in the preceding sections, Sudan is known for its protracted armed conflict and political instability that has resulted in numerous peace accords—yet it has failed to achieve a lasting peace. In fact, according to the PA-X, the largest and most authoritative database on peace agreements, Sudan is the second country with the most peace agreements in the last 35 years, behind Colombia (Bell & Sanja, 2019). Sudanese peace designers and their international stakeholders have employed a nearly identical tactic: making warring parties negotiate agreements that ultimately led to a power-sharing formula. The fragility of such a formula is that it incentivizes the excluded groups to carry arms. Also, because it is transactional, once a party is dissatisfied with the implementation, there is little incentive to honor the agreement's terms. This explains the reasons why, at times, the same armed groups would sign multiple peace agreements, effectively keeping Sudan in the cycle of violence for the last seven decades.

In this article, I argue that Sudanese stakeholders and international mediators should shift their approach. The current war should be seen as an opportunity to achieve a durable peace in Sudan. At the outset, it is imperative to distinguish between two objectives: a peace process and a ceasefire. Firstly, peace is a lengthy process that, given Sudan's historical context, requires an inclusive and participatory approach. This process should involve Sudanese stakeholders beyond the armed actors. It should be designed by the Sudanese people, with minimal involvement of international actors, given its sensitivity and long-term impact on shaping the state's political and economic structures. For a successful and legitimate peace agreement, the Sudanese people must be the owners and be the ultimate guarantors. Certain conditions must be met for a genuine and participatory peace process to commence. These conditions include the provision of physical security and basic humanitarian necessities. In other words, a ceasefire agreement must be in place first and foremost, which leads me to the second point, a ceasefire agreement.

While there is no uniform definition of the term 'ceasefire,' it is generally understood as the codification of a specific military and political state of affairs during wartime (Sosnowski, 2023). A ceasefire agreement is part of the broader peace process, which aims to agree on the timing, form, and content of arrangements to end violence (Hofmann & Schneckener, 2011). It is characterized by spatial limitations, a shorter timeframe, a lower degree of formality, and less expansive provisions (Lundgren, Svensson, & Karakus, 2023). The purpose and agenda of the ceasefire are determined by the parties to the violence and/or affected communities. A ceasefire is essential in reducing violence, but cannot alone lead to a lasting peace. Unlike a peace process, a ceasefire benefits greatly from the involvement of international and regional stakeholders in both designing the agreement and ensuring its implementation (U.N.D.P., 2022).

It should be noted, however, that while not legal documents, ceasefire agreements impart an aura of formality and legitimacy (Hultman & Mousa, 2025). The dilemma, therefore, is that a ceasefire agreement endorses and acknowledges the *status quo,* which can activate rivalries, machinations of control, or create particular control for different parties (Hultman & Mousa, 2025). It creates a new order, a wartime order (Hultman & Mousa, 2025). As such, ceasefires can lead to escalation or de-escalation depending on how the agreement is designed or reached. The agreement can be used strategically to increase the warring parties' ability to achieve their goals. But it can also be used to build trust and pave the way for lasting peace by ending violence. It can create a cooperative environment even amid antagonism and violence (Lundgren, Svensson, & Karakus, 2023).

Localized Ceasefires: A Pathway to Violence Reduction in Sudan

Sudan's ongoing conflict has now entered its fourth year, with no prospect of a peaceful resolution in sight. Despite the immense human suffering and destruction, the warring parties' appetite for more violence grows exponentially. In a recent statement, the Director of the World Health Organization confirmed that 2,036 people were killed in 213 attacks on health care facilities (Ghebreyesus, 2026). In many of these attacks, the warring parties used drones and airstrikes, deliberately targeting unambiguously civilian objects (Fleming, 2026).

The priority should now be protecting lives over peace negotiations for reasons stated in the preceding paragraphs. In 2007, the UN, in coordination with the AU, mandated the largest peace operation, tasked with reducing violence. While not specifically tasked with the protection of civilians, its mandate included crucial provisions, including promoting efforts to disarm the Janjaweed, now the RSF, and other militias (U.N., 2007). Regrettably, the UN Security Council effectively terminated the Darfur mission in December 2020, despite the escalating violence in the region (U.N.S.C., 2020). Notwithstanding the criticism for the failure to end violence (Reeves, 2018), the mission could have been enhanced to mitigate mass atrocities happening now.

Given the current geopolitical landscape, both regionally and internationally, it appears highly improbable that a similar mission would be mandated. With the international community remaining largely indifferent or incapable of effectively responding to the crisis in Sudan, the only viable option for protecting civilians lies within Sudan itself. This is even though the SAF and the RSF demonstrate no genuine interest in ending violence. The warring parties and their allied militias have diminished incentives to engage in a good-faith process to end the conflict, as they all believe they could militarily win the fight. These insights prompt the discussion on localized ceasefires.

Localized or geographic ceasefires are limited to specific areas, such as a city, town, or village (Lundgren, Svensson, & Karakus, 2023). The objectives include protecting populations at risk and de-escalating conflict in a particular location. Such ceasefires can help determine the feasibility of a wider or national ceasefire (U.N.D.P., 2022). They are meant to protect civilians and enable humanitarian access

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud stands with officials as Sudanese army and Rapid Support Forces representatives sign a seven-day ceasefire agreement in Jeddah on May 20, 2023. (Photo Credit: SPA)

Sheikh Abdallah Ibrahim Ahmed from Kubum, an elder who was involved in several Judiya cases, an ancient Peace-Making Tradition (Photo Credit: Ayman Ayoub)

to the vulnerable. Even relatively limited pauses or area-based deals can temporarily stop shelling, drone strikes, raids, or pillaging. The localized ceasefires seek to establish dialogue between the protagonists in the conflict or disaster without political pretensions. Localized ceasefires are pragmatic tools in fragmented wars. Evidence suggests that gradual solutions provide possible pathways to de-escalation in conflict resolution (Lundgren, Svensson, & Karakus, 2023).

In Sudan, particularly in Darfur, where the historical context exacerbates the propensity for mass atrocities, there exists a mechanism known as *Judiya,* which can be used to establish localized ceasefires. The *Judiya* is a local mechanism for conflict resolution, mediation, reconciliation, and justice. This system is not unique to Sudan—it is prevalent in Burundi, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Uganda, among others (Huyse & Salter, 2008). It is viewed as a successful traditional institution for administering justice (Martin, Badrī, & Jamal, 2005). It consists of *Ajaweed,* or individuals selected from communities of elders and wisdom, who are well aware of the environment, its complexity, and historical contexts. Like the jury system, they serve voluntarily in *Judiya.* The *Judiya,* therefore, represents a mechanism that is driven and controlled by the parties themselves. It depends on key principles to be effective: (a) mediators are volunteers; (b) all parties voluntarily accept them before the commencement of the proceedings; (c) the law governing the process is customary law and tradition; and (d) the implementation of the *Judiya* is a shared responsibility of the parties to the conflict, the mediators, and the community as a whole. Community leaders serve as guarantors for the implementation of the final agreement (Gado, 2013).

The *Judiya* can serve as a mechanism to promote localized cessation of hostilities and can be successful if supported by the international and regional stakeholders, particularly with a robust enforcement and implementation strategy. Indeed, given the power dynamics in favor of the RSF and its allied militias, which are heavily armed and equipped with the most sophisticated weapons and technologies, the necessity of international backing with severe consequences for spoilers becomes vital. A robust international backing can reduce violence as other efforts to establish a national ceasefire continue.

Ultimately, localized ceasefires are not as straightforward as they seem. They face numerous challenges, chief among them being the unwillingness to participate in the process due to the imbalance of power, fragmented armed actors, and weak enforcement mechanisms. Nonetheless, here I outline four reasons for their success in Darfur, where a *Judiya* mechanism is already in place and can potentially be extended to other regions—hopefully, the conflict is resolved before waiting to measure the success of this approach in Darfur. First, localized ceasefires are less complex than a nationwide ceasefire between

armed groups and the government. During a nationwide ceasefire, actors may be temporarily incentivized to increase violence to strengthen their bargaining position at the negotiation table or to spoil the peace process if they are excluded.

Second, without normalizing or legitimizing the *status quo*, many actors in Darfur share similar political views of Sudan, particularly narratives countering the Islamic Movement in Sudan and advocating an equitable distribution of power and wealth. As such, it is a win-win for all the actors in Darfur, at least since the RSF controls most of Sudan's western region.

Third, localized ceasefires help bridge the trust deficit among the Darfurians and step towards the inevitable reconciliation in a region torn by decades of devastating conflicts and atrocities. This, in turn, makes the comprehensive and national peace less complex. Finally, the international and regional communities' role of signaling will pressure the parties to show that they are able to control their fighters and impose reputational and punitive costs on those failing to abide by the terms of ceasefires.

Conclusion

The conflict in Sudan's impact extends beyond its socially disintegrating effects to pose a direct threat to the very existence of specific ethnic groups. In particular, the non-Arab communities in Darfur are at constant risk of mass atrocities. The international community's response has been inadequate, and its actions cannot be relied upon to protect civilians effectively. Furthermore, given the warring parties' lack of interest in ending violence, Sudanese civilians are left to seek creative approaches to minimize violence. As the article demonstrates, it is imperative to prioritize localized ceasefires over national or broader peace processes, as the latter must be preceded by efforts to create an environment conducive to meaningful participation by Sudanese civilians alongside armed actors. The existing regional and international forums dedicated to promoting humanitarian truces between the warring parties should be directed towards supporting local ceasefires based on traditional mechanisms, such as the *Judiya*. However, it is crucial to clarify that such arrangements should not be perceived as legitimizing the current *status quo*. That way, we can ensure some protection for civilians as the Sudanese continue their pursuit of a national ceasefire and comprehensive peace negotiations.

> The *Judiya* can serve as a mechanism to promote localized cessation of hostilities and can be successful if supported by the international and regional stakeholders, particularly with a robust enforcement and implementation strategy

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Military Technological Evolution: How Drones are Redefining Conflicts in the Horn of Africa

By Bravin Onditi

Abstract

Over the past decade, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) commonly known as drones have evolved from niche surveillance instruments into decisive weapons of war. Their proliferation across the Horn of Africa and its immediate neighbourhood has introduced a new and deeply consequential variable into conflicts that are already among the world's most complex and deadly. This article examines how drone warfare is reshaping armed conflict in the region through four distinct but interrelated case studies: the Tigray war in Ethiopia, the ongoing campaign against al-Shabaab in Somalia, the armed conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the civil war in Sudan. Drawing on publicly available evidence, field reporting, and open-source analysis, the article argues that while drones have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity to alter battlefield dynamics and shift military balances, their deployment has also produced severe and systematic civilian harm, acute accountability deficits, and strategic outcomes that remain, at best, inconclusive. The governance of these systems represents one of the most urgent security challenges facing the Horn of Africa today.

Introduction

There is a particular moment in the history of any new weapon when it stops being a novelty and becomes a norm. For armoured tanks, that moment came in the mud of the Western Front in 1916. For aerial bombardment, it came in the ruins of Guernica in 1937. For unmanned aerial vehicles, that moment has arguably arrived across the Horn of Africa not in a single dramatic event, but through an accumulating weight of strikes, deaths, and displaced populations that now form a distinctly 21st-century pattern of warfare.

Drones, of course, are not entirely new to the region. The United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) has operated over conflict zones in Somalia since 2007. But what has changed dramatically in recent years is the scale, diversity, and geographic spread of drone warfare and critically, who is using these systems and against whom. Ethiopian federal forces deployed Turkish and Iranian drones with devastating effect during the Tigray war of 2020 to 2022. The government of the DRC is now fielding Chinese attack systems against the March 23 Movement (M23) in North and South Kivu. Both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have acquired competing drone arsenals through rival external sponsors. And in Somalia, American and Turkish drones continue to strike al-Shabaab targets in a campaign that has now stretched across nearly two decades.

What unites these cases is not merely technology. It is a set of shared patterns: the involvement of external suppliers reshaping local balances of power, the systematic undercounting of civilian casualties, the absence of meaningful accountability mechanisms, and the tendency of drone campaigns to produce tactical advantage without delivering the political resolution that genuine peace requires. This article examines each of these four conflicts in turn, before drawing out the broader strategic implications for the region and for regional governance of emerging military technologies.

The Evolution of Drone Capabilities

Before turning to the case studies, it is worth briefly sketching the technological landscape that makes this analysis necessary. Military drones have changed dramatically since their first significant deployment by the United States following the September 11 attacks in 2001. Early systems like the Predator were primarily platforms for surveillance and, occasionally, targeted killing. Today's UAVs encompass a far wider spectrum: medium-altitude, long-endurance (MALE) strike aircraft

Drones (UAVs) are rapidly transforming modern warfare—becoming smarter, more autonomous, and essential for intelligence, precision strikes, and safer military operations. (Photo Credit: Drop Lab)

capable of flying for 24 hours or more; loitering munitions that circle a target area before diving onto it; first-person-view (FPV) kamikaze drones that cost as little as a few hundred dollars to build; and long-range one-way attack vehicles capable of travelling over a thousand kilometres to strike infrastructure or military installations.

Critically, this technological diversification has been accompanied by an equally consequential diversification of supply. China, Turkey, Iran, Serbia, and Russia have all emerged as significant UAV exporters, each offering systems at price points and with supply conditions that the established Western defence industry has generally not matched. This has dramatically lowered the barriers to entry for states and as Sudan demonstrates, for paramilitary forces that wish to acquire meaningful aerial strike capability. The result is a regional security landscape in which the monopoly on airpower that national armies once held has become increasingly contested.

This proliferation matters not just militarily but politically. When a rebel movement can acquire a drone capable of striking an international airport as M23 demonstrated in Kisangani in February 2026, the strategic calculus of any armed conflict changes fundamentally.

Case Study One: **Tigray Conflict in Ethiopia**

The Tigray conflict, which lasted from November 2020 to November 2022 in northern Ethiopia's Tigray region, claimed an estimated 600,000 lives—a toll that, by most comparative measures, made it one of the deadliest wars anywhere in the world in the early 21st century (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). It was also the first conflict in Africa in which a government deployed a diversified arsenal of Chinese, Turkish, and Iranian combat drones as a central—arguably decisive—element of its military strategy.

Ethiopia entered the war with a limited unmanned inventory. By late 2021, however, the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) had dramatically expanded its capabilities. Open-source investigators documented Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones, Chinese Wing Loong and CH-4 systems, and Iranian Mohajer-6 combat UAVs at four separate Ethiopian air bases (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). The acquisition of these systems was, in retrospect, militarily decisive. When Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) advanced to within roughly 200 kilometres of Addis Ababa in November 2021, it was drone-backed operations providing real-time

intelligence, directing artillery strikes, and hitting TDF logistics nodes that enabled the ENDF to halt and then reverse the rebel advance (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). By December 2021, government forces had pushed the TDF back fully into Tigray.

The military effectiveness of this campaign, however, was matched by its human cost. Between October 2021 and January 2022 alone, aerial attacks caused at least 143 documented deaths and over 213 injuries in Tigray and researchers have consistently noted that these figures substantially undercount actual casualties, given the near-total communications blackout imposed by Addis Ababa (Insecurity Insight, 2022). The number of documented strikes causing civilian harm ran into the dozens.

The most extensively verified of these incidents occurred on January 7, 2022, when an armed drone struck the compound of Dedebit Elementary School in northwestern Tigray, which was at the time sheltering thousands of internally displaced people. Analysis of shrapnel recovered from the site, combined with satellite imagery and video documentation, allowed investigators to confirm the use of Turkish-manufactured precision-guided munitions in the strike, which killed at least 57 civilians and wounded 42 others (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Washington Post, 2022). Approximately one month later, on February 7, 2022, a strike on another displacement camp killed at least 59 people (Insecurity Insight, 2022).

The targeting was not confined to displacement sites. Internal documentation shared by humanitarian organisations with the Washington Post recorded more than 300 civilian deaths from drone and airstrikes between September 2021 and early 2022, with hit locations including a flour mill, public buses, farms, hotels, and busy market areas in multiple towns across Tigray (Washington Post, 2022). Aid workers were not spared: on October 28, 2021, a drone strike killed a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) staff member while he was travelling by car. On October 14, 2022 after the formal cessation of hostilities had been announced a strike killed an International Rescue Committee (IRC) nutrition programme worker in Shire (Insecurity Insight, 2022). The Ethiopian government never publicly acknowledged or explained any of these strikes. The only independent international mechanism investigating violations the UN Human Rights Council's International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia was terminated in October 2023 following lobbying by the Ethiopian government and its supporters in the Council. No accountability process has emerged since.

What the Tigray case demonstrates, above all else, is that the availability of drone technology does not, of itself, produce precision or restraint. The systems used—notably the Turkish TB2 with its laser-guided munitions—are capable of precision. Whether precision is exercised depends on targeting intelligence, command authority, and the presence or absence of meaningful legal constraints. In Tigray, all three were effectively absent.

Case Study Two: **Somalia**

Somalia has the distinction of being the site of the longest-running institutionalized drone campaign on the African continent. Since 2007, AFRICOM has conducted over 262 strikes in the country, aimed primarily at dismantling the operational capacity of al-Shabaab—the al-Qaeda-affiliated insurgent network that controls large swathes of rural Somalia, extracts taxation from the population under its control, and continues to conduct complex attacks in Mogadishu and southern Somalia (Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2024).

What distinguishes the Somalia campaign from Tigray and Sudan is its institutional framework. AFRICOM publishes regular press releases acknowledging strikes and claiming non-combatant casualty assessments. Operations are conducted with the formal consent and cooperation of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and are generally coordinated with the Somali National Army (SNA). In January 2026, for instance, AFRICOM confirmed coordinated strikes targeting al-Shabaab in the vicinity of Godane, northeast of Mogadishu (AFRICOM, 2026). This level of transparency—imperfect as it is—represents a qualitatively different approach to drone warfare than that practiced by the ENDF in Tigray or either party in Sudan.

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Yet transparency and effectiveness are not the same thing, and the Somalia campaign raises significant questions about the limits of drone-based counter-insurgency. Rossiter (2020), drawing on interview data from Mogadishu and the wider region, argues that United States drone strikes offer the occasional but only reliable check on al-Shabaab, thereby allowing the FGS to continue functioning. This is a carefully hedged assessment, and it is worth sitting with its implications. Nearly two decades of strikes have not broken al-Shabaab. The movement has lost multiple mid- and senior-level commanders to drone strikes but has consistently replaced them. It retains the capacity to impose devastating attacks on Mogadishu and to tax and administer large rural populations. The structural conditions that sustain it—governance failure, economic marginalisation, clan politics—are untouched by aerial operations.

A further dimension has emerged in recent years that adds complexity to this picture. Turkey has become an active participant in the drone war against al-Shabaab, conducting at least 19 strikes since 2022 according to data compiled by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (2024). This multi-actor character of the campaign with American and Turkish drones now operating alongside Somali forces raises questions that have not been adequately addressed publicly: about coordination protocols, about the cumulative impact on civilian populations, and about accountability when things go wrong.

The Foundation for Defense of Democracies (2024) data also records that AFRICOM conducted at least 18 airstrikes inside Somalia in 2023, making it the most active year for United States military operations in Somalia since 2021. Strikes have continued into 2025 and 2026 at a sustained tempo. This is an extraordinary long-term military commitment one whose strategic dividends remain, by any objective measure, contested. Drone warfare can degrade and disrupt. It cannot govern, build, or reconcile.

Case Study Three: **Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**

The conflict in the eastern DRC is one of the oldest, most complex, and most deadly in the world. Rooted in

US army drone used against an al-Shabab training camp, killing about 150 militants, a few kilometres north of the capital Mogadishu (Photo Credits: LIFEGATE|Daily/Stefano Carnazzi)

the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, sustained by competition over minerals, ethnic grievances, and the political calculations of regional powers, it has displaced millions and killed hundreds of thousands over the past three decades. The resurgence of M23 from 2021 with documented military support from Rwanda added a new and more capable actor to a conflict that was already extraordinarily difficult to manage. The introduction of combat drones has added yet another layer of complexity. The DRC government's decision to acquire Chinese CH-4 MALE attack drones in 2023 was driven by a clear tactical logic. Ground-based operations in the rugged terrain of North and South Kivu are costly and slow. The ENDF's use of drones in Tigray had been widely observed by other African military establishments. Chinese CH-4 systems produced by the China Academy of Aerospace Aerodynamics and capable of extended endurance and precision strike offered the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC) a way to project power over contested terrain without the risks of crewed air operations (HumAngle Media, 2026). By 2024, the FARDC had supplemented this arsenal with Turkish TB2 drones, reflecting a diversification of supply sources that echoes broader African acquisition trends.

The operational record of these systems is mixed but consequential. FARDC drone operations targeted M23 positions across Masisi territory, Walikale, and multiple sites in South Kivu throughout 2024 and into 2025. The strategic significance of these strikes became clear in April 2025, when M23 offered to withdraw from Walikale on the condition that the FARDC withdraw its attack drones—an implicit acknowledgment that the aerial campaign was meaningfully degrading rebel capabilities (Xtrafrica, 2026).

The most significant single drone action in this conflict to date occurred in the early morning hours of February 24, 2026, when a FARDC drone strike near Rubaya killed Willy Ngoma, M23's long-serving military spokesperson and a figure sanctioned by both the European Union and the United Nations Security Council (Critical Threats, 2026; France 24, 2026). The strike coincided with a broader coordinated FARDC-Wazalendo offensive that temporarily retook territory around Rubaya—a town whose strategic importance is inseparable from the coltan deposits in its vicinity. Rubaya's mines produce between 15 and 30 per cent of the world's supply of coltan, a mineral that is indispensable in the manufacture of smartphones, laptops, and a range of other electronic devices (France 24, 2026). Control of these mines and the revenue they generate is not incidental to the conflict; it is one of the conflict's central drivers.

M23 has not been passive in the face of FARDC aerial operations. With Rwandan technical and military support, the movement has developed counter-drone capabilities that have materially complicated FARDC operations. A United Nations document from February 2024 confirmed a suspected Rwandan Defence Force surface-to-air missile firing at a United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) observation drone the first documented instance of such a system being used in the theatre (Military Africa, 2025). By December 2025, M23 had claimed to have downed a FARDC TB2 near Luvungi. In February 2026, rebel forces launched a kamikaze drone attack on Kisangani Bangoka International Airport, the FARDC's primary air support hub, deploying at least eight drones, several of which were interdicted before reaching their targets (Africanews, 2026).

The DRC case illustrates a dynamic that is likely to become increasingly common across African conflict environments: the simultaneous development of offensive drone capabilities and counter-drone measures, in a context where external technical supporters are actively involved on both sides. This dynamic does not resolve conflicts; it deepens and prolongs them.

Case Study Four: **Sudan**

If Tigray established the template for drone warfare in Africa, and Somalia represents its most institutionalized expression, Sudan in 2023 to 2026 represents its most extreme manifestation a drone war of extraordinary scale, conducted with near-total impunity, in which civilians and civilian infrastructure have been systematically targeted by both sides.

The civil war began in April 2023 when the power-sharing arrangement between the SAF and the RSF—the paramilitary successor to the Janjaweed militias that carried out mass atrocities in Darfur in the early 2000s—collapsed into open fighting. The human cost has been catastrophic. By early 2026, the United Nations described Sudan as the world's largest humanitarian crisis, with more than 14 million people displaced and at least 30 million in acute need of assistance (Al Jazeera, 2026a).

The drone dimensions of this conflict are staggering. According to data compiled by the Africa Center for

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Strategic Studies, Sudan accounted for 264 of the 484 drone strikes recorded across 13 African countries in 2024—more than half the continental total (Al Jazeera, 2025). The pace accelerated dramatically in 2025, when approximately 472 drone strikes were recorded. By February 2026, Al Jazeera's tracking of the conflict had logged over 1,000 drone attacks since the war began (Al Jazeera, 2026a). The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) attributes at least 2,200 deaths to drone attacks since April 2023, with 80 per cent of those deaths—over 1,700 people—occurring in 2025 alone (Sudan Tribune, 2026).

The external supply chains fuelling this aerial arms race are, at this point, well documented. The SAF has received Iranian Mohajer-6 combat UAVs, reportedly delivered via cargo flights to Port Sudan from late 2023 onward. Turkey has supplied Bayraktar drones, channelled through Egypt. Russia shifted in 2024 from supporting RSF-linked entities to backing the SAF directly, partly in exchange for progress on a long-sought Red Sea naval base agreement (Al Jazeera, 2026a). The RSF, which possesses no conventional air force, has been armed through a separate network. A 2024 Amnesty International report documented Chinese and Serbian drones in RSF operations. Chinese FH-95 kamikaze systems with reported ranges of up to 2,000 kilometres have been identified in high-profile RSF strikes, reportedly supplied through the United Arab Emirates via transit points in Libya, Chad, and South Sudan (Al Jazeera, 2026a).

The civilian toll from this aerial campaign is, by any reasonable standard, catastrophic. On October 11, 2025, an RSF drone struck a displacement shelter at Dar al-Arqam within the compound of Omdurman Islamic University in El Fasher, killing at least 57 people among them 22 women and 17 children (Geopolitical Monitor, 2025). Earlier attacks on displacement camps in El Fasher killed over 120 people across multiple strikes. A United Nations report documented an RSF drone strike on a mosque during Friday prayers that killed 11 children. On October 17, 2025, a SAF drone strike in El Mazroub, North Kordofan, killed at least 18 civilians. In Kadugli, South Kordofan, UN reporting attributed at least 100 civilian deaths to strikes on a kindergarten and a hospital in December 2025 (Sudan Tribune, 2026).

Infrastructure has been targeted with equal disregard. RSF drones struck Khartoum International Airport on October 21 and 22, 2025, days before its planned reopening the first since the conflict began. Strikes on dams and electrical transmission infrastructure in Blue Nile and Sennar states on the same night plunged cities into darkness and disrupted access to essential services (OHCHR, 2025). In May 2025, RSF strikes hit airports and fuel depots in Kassala and Port Sudan the primary hub for all humanitarian logistics in Sudan forcing a temporary suspension of United Nations humanitarian flights (ACAPS, 2025). A February 2026 strike struck four vehicles, including trucks carrying United Nations relief supplies, in the Er-Rahad and Es Samih areas of North Kordofan (Al Jazeera, 2026b).

Technologically, the conflict has entered a spiral of escalation. The SAF has developed a domestically produced one-way attack drone, the Safrouq, with a stated range of 600 kilometres and integrated anti-jamming systems—a direct response to the RSF's deployment of Belarusian Groza-S electronic warfare equipment designed to identify and neutralise incoming drones (Africa Defense Forum, 2025). Long-range RSF drones launched from Darfur have targeted SAF bases in Port Sudan, forcing the relocation of Bayraktar aircraft to underground storage. The war in the air has become, in many respects, as technically sophisticated as anything currently being observed in Ukraine or the Middle East.

Cross-Cutting Themes and Strategic Implications

The four case studies examined in this article are, in important ways, distinct. They involve different actors, different political contexts, different levels of institutional oversight, and different scales of violence. Yet they share a set of structural features that together define the

character of drone warfare in the Horn of Africa as it is currently practiced.

a) The democratization of aerial strike capability

Perhaps the most consequential development documented across these cases is the extent to which meaningful aerial strike capability has migrated from the exclusive domain of major military powers to a far wider range of actors. The RSF, a paramilitary force with no air force, no trained pilots, and no maintenance infrastructure has acquired drones capable of striking targets over 2,000 kilometres away. M23 rebels have attacked an international airport with kamikaze UAVs. Al Shabaab has been struck by Turkish government drones operating under a bilateral agreement with the FGS. This is a genuinely new strategic environment, and its implications for regional stability are profound.

b) The gap between precision and protection

Manufacturers and governments alike frequently invoke the concept of precision when justifying the deployment of armed drones. The evidence from the Horn of Africa complicates this claim significantly. Precision is a property of a system in a particular targeting environment, with particular intelligence inputs, under particular command conditions. When those conditions are absent—when intelligence is poor, when accountability is weak, when civilian harm carries no consequences—precision does not translate into protection. Across Tigray, Sudan, and the DRC, documented evidence consistently shows strikes hitting schools, displacement camps, hospitals, mosques, markets, and humanitarian convoys. These were not predominantly accidents of faulty technology; they were products of faulty governance.

c) The accountability crisis

None of the four conflicts examined here has produced a functioning accountability mechanism for documented violations of international humanitarian law attributable to drone strikes. In Ethiopia, the UN investigative mechanism was closed. In Sudan, the scale of violations has overwhelmed international capacity and political will. In the DRC, accountability processes for aerial strikes remain largely absent. This impunity is not incidental to the problem; it is part of the problem. When operators of

Ethiopian federal government drone strike in Entcho and Tungabeta, Tigray, killing one person and seriously injuring another after hitting a civilian truck (Photo Credit: Garowe Online)

The drone is not, in itself, a protagonist in the conflicts of the Horn of Africa. It is a tool capable of extraordinary precision and extraordinary harm, depending entirely on the decisions of those who deploy it, the intelligence that guides it, and the accountability frameworks within which it operates

drone systems face no consequences for civilian harm, the incentives for restraint are correspondingly diminished.

d) Strategic inconclusiveness

It is worth being blunt on this point. Drone warfare in the Horn of Africa has not resolved a single conflict. In Ethiopia, the Tigray war ended in a negotiated cessation of hostilities, not in a military victory, and the underlying political grievances remain unresolved. In Somalia, al-Shabaab endures after 18 years of strikes. In the DRC, M23 captured Goma and Bukavu in early 2025 despite sustained FARDC drone operations. In Sudan, nearly three years of intensive aerial bombardment have produced mass death but no decisive military or political outcome. Drones can change who is winning a battle. They cannot determine who wins a war, and they certainly cannot build a peace.

e) The regional governance deficit

The Horn of Africa lacks any regional framework specifically governing the acquisition, transfer, or use of armed drones in conflict. The African Union has not developed standards or norms for drone use in armed conflict. There is no regional equivalent to the discussions on autonomous weapons systems taking place in international forums. External suppliers—Chinese, Turkish, Iranian, Serbian, Russian, and Emirati—operate in this governance vacuum without conditionality or accountability. Addressing this gap is, in the view of this Institute, one of the most urgent medium-term security governance priorities in the region.

Conclusion

The drone is not, in itself, a protagonist in the conflicts of the Horn of Africa. It is a tool capable of extraordinary precision and extraordinary harm, depending entirely on the decisions of those who deploy it, the intelligence that guides it, and the accountability frameworks within which it operates. What the four case studies examined in this article demonstrate is that, in the Horn of Africa as it currently stands, those decisions are often poorly constrained, that intelligence is frequently inadequate, and that accountability frameworks are largely absent.

This is not a counsel of despair. It is a challenge for regional governments, for the African Union, for international partners, and for analytical institutions to bring the same urgency to the governance of drone warfare. The proliferation of unmanned aerial systems is not slowing. The conflicts in which they are being used are not resolving. The civilians who are paying the highest price in Tigray, in Mogadishu's hinterland, in the coltan-rich hills of North Kivu, in the ruins of El Fasher deserve better than a regional and international community that watches, documents, and does little else. Mastery of drone technology will increasingly determine battlefield outcomes across the Horn of Africa. Mastery of the governance frameworks needed to constrain that technology may, in the end, determine whether peace in this region is achievable at all.

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Sudan, the Red Sea, and Gulf Rivalries: How Regional Competition is Reshaping Security and Governance in the Horn of Africa

By Hossamaldeen Ibrahim

Abstract

This article examines how Gulf rivalries are reshaping security dynamics and governance structures in Sudan, positioning the country as a central arena within Red Sea geopolitics and broader Horn of Africa dynamics. It explores the ways in which external competition interacts with domestic fragility to produce new patterns of authority and conflict that extend far beyond Sudan's borders. The paper demonstrates that Gulf patronage reinforces fragmented sovereignty, empowers hybrid security arrangements, sustains war economies through gold smuggling and selective military support, and generates significant spillover effects across the Horn of Africa. By early 2026, these dynamics have prolonged the war, deepened humanitarian suffering (including famine in multiple regions), and complicated any realistic path to national reconciliation. Sudan has thus become both a case study and a critical node in a wider regional transformation that is redefining security complexes from the Red Sea to the Great Lakes. The analysis concludes that without transforming competitive patronage into coordinated, accountable engagement, Gulf rivalries will continue to entrench instability, governance fragmentation, and humanitarian catastrophe across the Horn of Africa. Recommendations: Strengthening multilateral governance of the Red Sea, supporting Sudanese institutional reconstruction, improving transparency in foreign investments, enhancing regional security cooperation, and adopting conflict-sensitive engagement strategies are critical to mitigating destabilizing competition. Specific steps include establishing coordinated Red Sea forums, channeling aid through inclusive state-building programs, enforcing regulatory oversight of resource deals, creating joint intelligence sharing platforms, and aligning all external support with African Union led peace processes.

Introduction

Sudan has undergone a profound transformation in regional geopolitics, shifting from a relatively peripheral actor to a pivotal battleground where local power struggles intersect with intense international competition. The war that erupted between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in April 2023 has not only caused institutional collapse and one of the world's worst humanitarian crises but has also triggered an unprecedented wave of external engagement. As of March 2026, according to Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) figures, the conflict has resulted in over 170,000 direct deaths, displaced more than 11 million people internally, and forced more than 3 million refugees and returnees into neighboring countries. Famine has been officially declared in parts of North Darfur and is threatening additional regions, while Sudan's economy has shrunk by an estimated 55% since the war began, wiping out decades of development gains. (World Bank, 2025).

This evolving landscape is rooted in a deeper structural reality: Sudan's 800-kilometre Red Sea coastline has dramatically increased its strategic value precisely at the moment when Gulf states are actively projecting power across the Horn of Africa. The Red Sea accounts for approximately 12 percent of global seaborne trade and remains a critical artery for energy shipments and military logistics. (World Bank, 2023). What many observers initially viewed as a purely domestic power struggle between two rival Sudanese military factions is, in reality, deeply embedded within a broader geopolitical contest involving massive economic investments, arms transfers, political alliances, and naval posturing. Recent milestones illustrate this entanglement. The fall of Al-Fasher in late 2025 after a prolonged RSF siege was accompanied by documented atrocities and mass displacement, prompting fresh international condemnation while simultaneously highlighting how external logistical and financial support enabled the offensive to continue

Map of the Sudan, the Red Sea, and Gulf countries, highlighting borders and their influence on security and governance in the Horn of Africa (Photo Credit: PMF IAS)

(International Crisis Group, 2026). Concurrently, Gulf states have faced their own regional pressures, including Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping since late 2023 and shifting Middle East alliances, yet they have maintained and even expanded their involvement in Sudan through humanitarian aid packages, mediation initiatives, and reported selective backing of local actors. (International Crisis Group, 2026; De Waal, 2023).

This article addresses a central question: how do Gulf rivalries interact with Sudan's internal fragility to reshape governance and security dynamics not only inside Sudan but across the entire Horn of Africa? The core argument is that external competition is far more than an additional layer of pressure—it functions as a constitutive element that actively shapes patterns of political authority, influences the behavior of armed groups, and reconfigures the political economy of violence. Sudan therefore serves simultaneously as a revealing case study and as a critical node in a wider regional transformation that is redefining security complexes from the Red Sea to the Great Lakes. To develop this argument, the paper begins by outlining a conceptual framework grounded in regional security complex theory and the politics of external patronage. It then evaluates Sudan's unique strategic position in the Red Sea arena, dissects the distinct strategies pursued by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, analyzes the resulting patterns of fragmented sovereignty and hybrid governance, examines the role of external actors in fueling internal war economies, traces cross-border spillovers throughout the Horn, engages with counterarguments regarding potential stabilizing effects, and concludes with targeted policy recommendations designed for policymakers and practitioners.

Conceptual Framework: External Patronage and Regional Security Dynamics

Understanding the interplay between Sudan's domestic fragmentation and external competition requires a robust theoretical lens. This article draws primarily on regional security complex theory, first articulated by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, and the complementary concept of external patronage. The Red Sea and Horn of Africa together constitute an interconnected security complex in which the security concerns of one state are inseparably linked to those of its neighbors. Threats and opportunities do not respect national borders; instead, they travel through refugee movements, arms trafficking routes, illicit trade networks, and shared economic corridors. In such complexes, instability in a pivotal state like Sudan quickly diffuses outward, creating chain reactions that affect multiple countries simultaneously. (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

The United Arab Emirates has similarly invested heavily in port infrastructure across the region, viewing Sudan as a logical extension of its existing network that stretches from Dubai to Djibouti and Berbera

Within this framework, external actors, most notably the Gulf states, have assumed increasingly prominent roles by projecting power through a combination of economic investments, military cooperation, and political alliances. Crucially, this projection rarely operates exclusively through formal state-to-state channels. More often, it involves direct relationships with sub-state actors, including paramilitary leaders, business elites, and local commanders. External patronage, defined here as the systematic provision of financial resources, military equipment, logistical support, or diplomatic cover by foreign powers to domestic stakeholders, produces distinct effects in fragile environments. In Sudan, patronage tends to reinforce pre-existing power imbalances, fragment authority structures, and hinder the consolidation of a coherent central state. Rather than acting as a stabilizing force, it frequently generates parallel systems of governance that compete with—and often undermine—formal institutions. Historical parallels can be drawn with cases such as Libya after 2011 or Yemen since 2015, where similar patronage dynamics prolonged civil wars and created durable hybrid political orders.

This theoretical approach is particularly useful for explaining the Sudanese case because it moves beyond simplistic narratives of "foreign interference" to reveal how Gulf rivalries become internalized within Sudan's conflict. Competitive patronage does not merely prolong fighting, it actively reshapes the incentives of local actors, alters resource flows, and redefines what constitutes legitimate authority. The framework also highlights why uncoordinated external engagement tends to exacerbate instability: when multiple patrons pursue conflicting objectives without overarching coordination mechanisms, the result is a more fragmented and unpredictable security environment. Applied to Sudan, this lens reveals that the war is no longer solely a contest between SAF and RSF; it has evolved into a regionalized conflict in which external calculations now exert decisive influence over battlefronts, economic survival strategies, and prospects for peace.

Sudan's Strategic Importance in the Red Sea Arena

Sudan's elevated geopolitical significance arises from the intersection of its geographic advantages and its current institutional weakness. The country possesses one of the longest coastlines on the Red Sea—more than 800 kilometres—featuring several operational ports and potential development sites. Port Sudan remains the primary gateway for the majority of Sudan's imports and exports, while the historic port of Suakin offers opportunities for tourism and trade revival. These assets sit astride one of the world's most vital maritime corridors, through which passes a significant share of global oil shipments, container traffic, and military vessels. Any disruption here carries immediate global economic consequences, as demonstrated by the Houthi-related shipping crisis that began in late 2023 and forced many vessels to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope, adding weeks to journey times and billions to insurance costs. (World Bank, 2023)

For Gulf states pursuing ambitious national visions, Sudan represents far more than a neighbor—it constitutes a strategic gateway for expanding influence throughout the Horn of Africa and into the western Indian Ocean. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 program includes massive Red Sea coastal developments such as NEOM and tourism megaprojects, making maritime stability in adjacent waters an existential priority. The United Arab Emirates has similarly invested heavily in port infrastructure across the region, viewing Sudan as a logical extension of its existing network that stretches from Dubai to Djibouti and Berbera. Sudan's internal fragility—characterized by the collapse of centralized command, the proliferation of armed factions, and the fragmentation of administrative control—creates precisely the kind of permissive environment in which selective foreign partnerships can flourish. This combination of high strategic value and low institutional resistance has turned Sudan into the focal point of contemporary Red Sea geopolitics. (Young, 2022)

Historical relationships have further amplified Sudan's relevance. Sudanese forces participated extensively in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen between 2015 and 2022, forging personal and institutional ties that have carried over into the current conflict. What began as military cooperation has gradually evolved into multifaceted

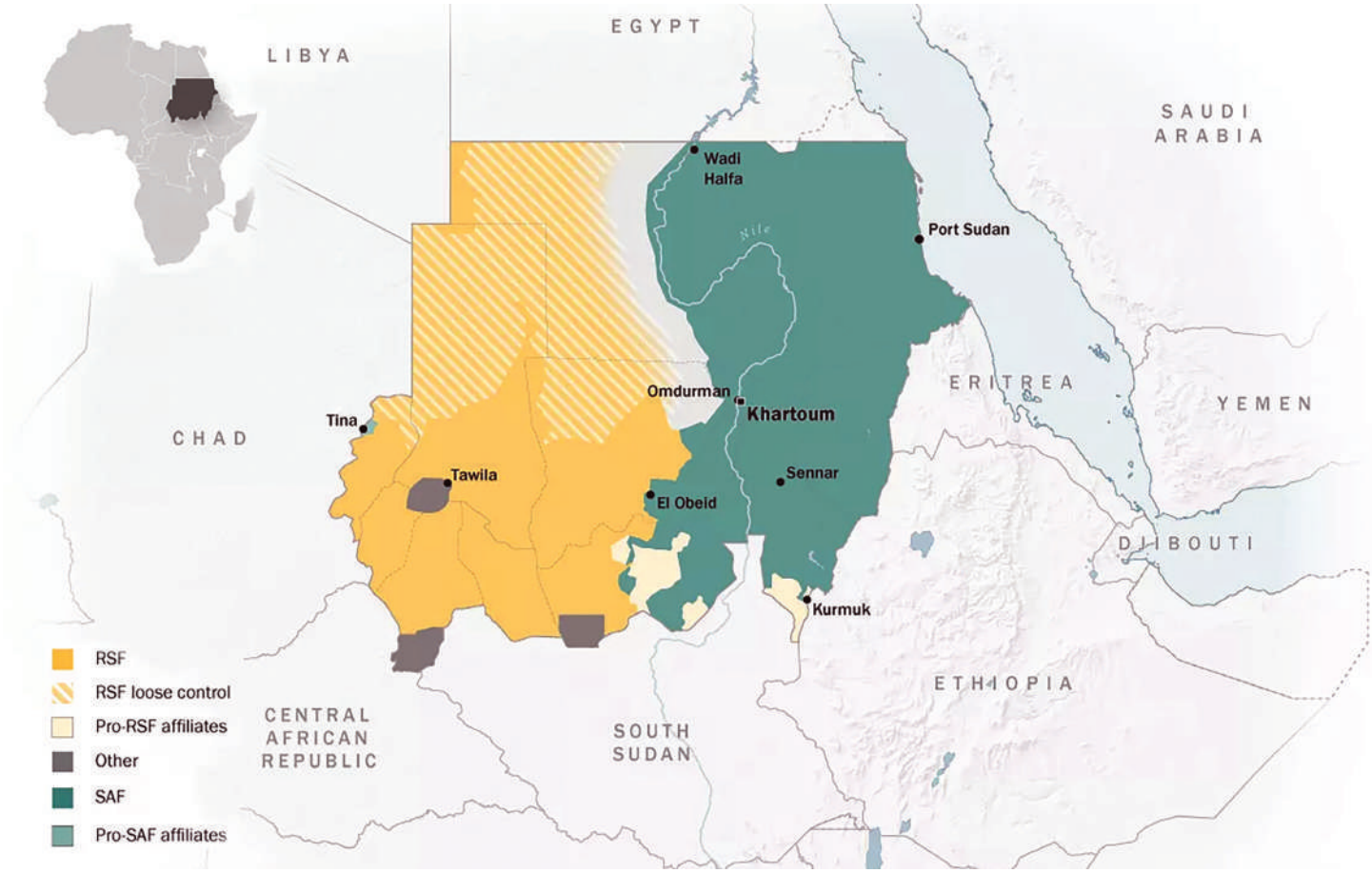
economic and political leverage. Today, control over Sudanese ports and coastal infrastructure is no longer merely a commercial matter, it has become a key element in the broader contest for regional dominance. As external actors vie for access and influence, Sudan's territory increasingly functions as a theater in which larger geopolitical rivalries are enacted, with profound consequences for governance inside the country and security across the Horn.

Gulf Rivalries and Expanding Influence in Sudan

Gulf engagement in Sudan reflects both converging interests in regional stability and underlying competitive dynamics. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar have each developed distinctive strategies that often align with different Sudanese factions, and these approaches have grown more pronounced since the 2023 war outbreak.

Saudi Arabia has consistently prioritized regional stability and maritime security. Riyadh has channeled billions of dollars into humanitarian assistance since 2023 and hosted successive rounds of Jeddah-mediated talks between Sudanese parties in May 2023. The kingdom maintains strong ties with the SAF-led administration in Port Sudan, regarding a centralized military led authority as the most reliable partner for safeguarding commercial shipping lanes and protecting its own Red Sea investments. (International Crisis Group, 2024). Saudi statements have repeatedly emphasized the need for ceasefires, especially as broader Middle East tensions and Red Sea disruptions continue to affect global trade. This preference for state institutions over paramilitary forces underscores Riyadh's long-term interest in predictable governance that can guarantee security for energy exports and emerging tourism sectors.

In contrast, the United Arab Emirates has adopted a more assertive and diversified strategy encompassing port development, large-scale economic investments, and direct relationships with a range of local actors, including armed groups. Multiple reports issued by the United Nations Panel of Experts on Sudan between 2024 and 2026, along with investigations by Amnesty International and Reuters, have documented allegations of weapons



Map of Sudan illustrating how the conflict has effectively divided the country, with the Rapid Support Forces controlling the west (green) and the Sudanese Armed Forces holding the east (yellow) (Photo Credit: ICG)

Sudan's elevated geopolitical significance arises from the intersection of its geographic advantages and its current institutional weakness. The country possesses one of the longest coastlines on the Red Sea—more than 800 kilometres—featuring several operational ports and potential development sites

shipments, logistical support, and financial transfers to the RSF, frequently routed via third countries such as Chad, Libya, the Central African Republic, and Somalia. While Abu Dhabi denies direct military involvement, it openly acknowledges extensive economic and security partnerships. (United Nations Panel of Experts on Sudan, 2025; The Sentry, 2024).

The economic dimension is particularly significant: Sudan's artisanal gold production, concentrated in RSF-controlled areas of Darfur, is largely refined and exported through Dubai, generating hundreds of millions of dollars annually that sustain RSF operations. Additional UAE investments target fertile agricultural zones along the Nile and potential port upgrades at Suakin. This multifaceted approach aligns with the UAE's broader ambition to construct a resilient network of maritime and economic footholds while countering ideological influences it perceives as threats. Critics contend that such engagement has inadvertently—or deliberately—prolonged the conflict by equipping the RSF with the resources necessary to maintain offensive momentum

Qatar, for its part, has emphasized political alliances and mediation. Doha has provided financial and diplomatic support that leans toward the SAF side while steering clear of direct military commitments. Qatar has hosted several dialogue sessions and contributed generously to humanitarian operations through the Qatar Red Crescent Society. Its role has adapted to shifting regional alignments, including the resolution of the 2017 Gulf crisis, yet it continues to cultivate long-term political influence. Like its counterparts, Qatar seeks strategic positioning without becoming overly entangled in any single faction's military fortunes. (De Waal, 2023).

These diverse engagements operate through overlapping channels: economic contracts negotiated outside formal state structures, legacies of Yemen era military cooperation, and patronage networks that extend to mid level commanders and business elites. Collectively, they intersect with Sudan's profound internal divisions, redistributing resources, tilting local power balances, and generating new incentives for continued warfare. The competitive character of these relationships has, perhaps unintentionally, accelerated the fragmentation of Sudanese authority and rendered unified national governance increasingly elusive. (Young, 2022).

Fragmented Sovereignty and Hybrid Governance

A primary outcome of intensified external engagement has been the progressive fragmentation of Sudanese sovereignty. Foreign support has not bolstered a centralized state; instead, it has empowered parallel power structures that now coexist with—or openly challenge—formal institutions. The security sector exemplifies this hybridity. Regular SAF units operate alongside RSF paramilitaries and a variety of externally linked militias, sometimes cooperating on specific fronts and sometimes clashing over territory or resources. The RSF itself has evolved into a hybrid actor that combines military functions with economic enterprises and political negotiations, maintaining independent command structures and transnational supply lines. This arrangement allows the RSF to function effectively as a quasi-state in the territories it controls, particularly in western Darfur(Chatham House, 2025).

Economic governance has undergone a parallel transformation. Major investment deals in agriculture, mining, and infrastructure are routinely concluded outside official channels, bypassing ministries and reducing both transparency and public accountability. Gold exports alone—tracked by UN experts at several hundred million dollars per year from RSF-held mines—flow through private networks linked to external refining hubs rather than contributing to a national budget. Consequently, economic rents accrue to specific armed factions rather than serving collective state purposes. Direct interactions between foreign representatives and local elites further erode institutional coherence, fostering patterns of elite

capture in which narrow interests prevail over broader national development goals. The cumulative effect is a governance landscape in which multiple centers of authority claim legitimacy, rendering future state reconstruction exceptionally challenging and increasing the likelihood of protracted low-level conflict even after any formal ceasefire.

Conflict Dynamics: External Competition and Internal War Economies

External competition exerts a decisive influence on the character and duration of Sudan's war. By supplying financial resources, military materiel, and political legitimacy to local protagonists, foreign patrons alter the cost-benefit calculations of armed groups and diminish their incentives for compromise. Alliances have become highly fluid, factions realign according to which external sponsor offers the most advantageous package at any given moment, producing a volatile battlefield environment marked by shifting frontlines and opportunistic ceasefires.

War economies have emerged as the central mechanism sustaining this dynamic. Control over high-value resources—gold mines in Jebel Amir and elsewhere in Darfur, fertile agricultural land along the Nile Valley, and strategic trade corridors—has become inextricably linked to external support networks. Gold, in particular, functions as the financial backbone of the RSF, with smuggling routes extending through Chad and Libya before reaching Dubai's refining and trading ecosystem. The SAF, meanwhile, derives revenue from controlled oil fields, customs duties in government-held territories, and taxation systems that have adapted to wartime conditions. External actors, whether by design or default, have become embedded components of these economic circuits, providing markets, transport logistics, and political protection that keep the conflict economically viable. The result is a self-perpetuating cycle in which violence generates profit, profit finances further violence, and external patronage supplies the necessary infrastructure. Consequently, the Sudanese conflict can no longer be analyzed in purely domestic terms; it must be understood as the product of intertwined local grievances and regional rivalries that together redefine the political economy of war in the Horn of Africa. (International Crisis Group, 2026).

Regional Spillovers: Implications for the Horn of Africa

The consequences of Sudan's instability extend far beyond its borders and constitute one of the most direct manifestations of how Gulf rivalries are actively reshaping the broader Horn of Africa security complex. As a central node linking the Red Sea corridor with the interior Horn, Sudan's war has generated cascading effects that transform what began as a domestic power struggle into a regionalized crisis. These spillovers are not merely incidental side effects, they are constitutive of the new regional order, driven by the same external patronage dynamics that sustain the Sudanese conflict itself (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; International Crisis Group, 2026).

Maritime security stands out as the most immediate and visible spillover. Increased militarization along Sudan's Red Sea coastline, combined with competing Gulf-backed infrastructure projects in Port Sudan, Suakin, and adjacent waters, has heightened risks of miscalculation and escalation. The presence of multiple external actors, Saudi Arabia supporting SAF-aligned facilities, while reported RSF linkages create parallel supply lines, has contributed to a more congested and contested maritime domain. Houthi attacks since late 2023 have already forced global shipping reroutes around the Cape of Good Hope, raising insurance costs and disrupting energy flows that pass through the Suez Canal corridor. Gulf rivalries exacerbate this volatility: selective port access deals and naval posturing by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have prompted defensive responses from other regional players, turning the Red Sea into a theater of proxy competition rather than cooperative governance (World Bank, 2023; Chatham House, 2025).

Cross border flows of people, arms, and resources further amplify instability. By March 2026, over 3 million Sudanese refugees and returnees have strained neighboring systems in Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Egypt. Chad and South Sudan, already fragile, now host hundreds of thousands of refugees, creating competition over scarce resources and risking localized clashes between host communities and newcomers (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2026). Arms proliferation is equally concerning, UN panels have documented flows of weapons routed through Gulf-supported networks into Darfur and

Workers at a gold mine in Sudan, where mining operations continue under limited regulatory oversight, raising concerns about environmental impact and public health. (Photo Credit: Ashraf Shazly/AFP via Getty Images)

onward to neighboring conflicts, sustaining non-state armed groups across borders (United Nations Panel of Experts on Sudan, 2025). These movements link directly to Ethiopia's western border, where allegations persist of RSF transit and recruitment, and to Eritrea, which has provided logistical support to SAF positions amid its own tense relations with Addis Ababa (International Crisis Group, 2026).

The diplomatic and institutional spillovers are equally damaging. Competing Gulf influences have fragmented regional mediation efforts. IGAD and African Union initiatives have been undermined as Sudanese factions seek patronage from different external backers, creating parallel negotiation tracks that dilute collective pressure for peace. In Ethiopia, the Sudanese crisis has intersected with longstanding Tigray and Amhara dynamics, raising fears of renewed Ethiopia-Eritrea flare ups or Nile resource disputes. South Sudan's fragile peace process faces additional strain from cross-border militias and refugee pressures, while Chad risks destabilization along its porous Darfur frontier (De Waal, 2023).

Economically, spillovers disrupt regional trade and development. Sudan's collapse has severed key supply routes, affecting agricultural exports from the Nile Valley and livestock trade with Ethiopia and South Sudan. Gulf investments in Sudanese gold and agriculture have created parallel economies that bypass national borders, reinforcing illicit networks rather than formal integration. These patterns mirror broader Red Sea geopolitics, where competitive port strategies (e.g., UAE projects in Somaliland versus Saudi initiatives) risk turning economic cooperation into zero-sum rivalry (Young, 2022).

Overall, the regional spillovers demonstrate that Gulf rivalries do not stop at Sudan's borders; they actively reconstitute the Horn of Africa as a single, interconnected insecurity complex. What happens in Khartoum or Port Sudan now directly conditions stability in Addis Ababa, Asmara, Juba, and N'Djamena. Without coordinated multilateral mechanisms to manage these interdependencies, external competition will continue to export instability, prolonging cycles of conflict and undermining prospects for regional peace (International Crisis Group, 2026).

Counterarguments: Can External Engagement Be Stabilizing?

Any balanced analysis must acknowledge that external engagement by Gulf states is not intrinsically destabilizing. Saudi Arabia has spearheaded large-scale humanitarian operations that have alleviated suffering in displacement camps, while the UAE has financed hospitals, schools, and agricultural initiatives in areas under its influence. Qatar has played a constructive mediation role, facilitating dialogue rounds that at times brought opposing parties closer to agreement. When such contributions are transparent, coordinated with Sudanese civilian stakeholders, and integrated into multilateral frameworks, they can indeed support stabilization and long-term development objectives.

Nevertheless, outcomes depend critically on context and implementation. Absent robust coordination and accountability mechanisms, even well-intentioned assistance risks reinforcing existing power asymmetries and prolonging fragmentation. The decisive variable is therefore not the mere presence of external actors but the specific form their involvement takes. Competitive, uncoordinated patronage tends to exacerbate instability by creating parallel authorities and reducing incentives for compromise. In contrast, cooperative and regulated engagement—aligned with national priorities and African Union principles—holds genuine potential to contribute positively. Recognizing the tangible benefits provided by Gulf states does not diminish the urgent requirement for improved oversight, greater transparency, and stronger integration with Sudanese and regional institutions. Only through such adjustments can external support shift from a driver of division to a catalyst for sustainable peace and governance reform.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Sudan's current trajectory vividly illustrates the complex entanglement of internal fragility and external competition. As Gulf states intensify their activities in the Red Sea arena, Sudan has become a primary theater in which larger regional rivalries are contested. The preceding analysis demonstrates that external patronage functions not as a peripheral influence but as a core driver of fragmented sovereignty, hybrid governance structures, and self-sustaining war economies. These processes carry profound implications for Horn of Africa stability, encompassing maritime security threats, cross-border refugee pressures, and risks of wider interstate conflict.

Policy Recommendations

To address these challenges, the following actionable steps are recommended:

- The United Nations Security Council and the African Union should establish and lead a standing multilateral Red Sea governance forum with binding guidelines on port development, resource extraction, and military presence to reduce unilateral competition and prevent further militarization of the Red Sea corridor.
- IGAD, in coordination with the African Union, should create dedicated regional intelligence sharing platforms and joint mechanisms among Horn of Africa states and Gulf partners to control arms proliferation, manage cross-border refugee movements, and coordinate rapid responses to emerging threats.
- International donors, the World Bank, and the European Union, working with Sudanese civilian authorities, should channel targeted and conditional aid specifically for inclusive state-building, institutional reconstruction, and capacity building programs that empower civilian led governance and counter fragmented sovereignty.
- Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar) must align all their political, economic, and military engagements with African Union led peace processes and adopt explicit conflict-sensitive safeguards to avoid empowering armed factions at the expense of legitimate state institutions.
- The UN, AU, and IGAD should institute mandatory international oversight and public disclosure mechanisms for all major foreign investments in

Sudan's current trajectory vividly illustrates the complex entanglement of internal fragility and external competition. As Gulf states intensify their activities in the Red Sea arena, Sudan has become a primary theater in which larger regional rivalries are contested

Sudan, particularly gold trade, agricultural land deals, and port infrastructure projects, to improve transparency and reduce elite capture.

- Sudanese transitional authorities and civilian actors, supported by the African Union and international partners, should prioritize the development of inclusive national dialogue processes that integrate local communities and civil society to ensure that external support serves long-term peace and accountable governance rather than short term patronage.

Closing Statement

The future of Sudan and the broader stability of the Red Sea region ultimately hinges on the capacity of international and regional actors to transform competitive patronage into coordinated, transparent, and accountable engagement that places Sudanese civilian priorities at the center. Without this fundamental reorientation, the dynamics currently at play risk entrenching cycles of violence, governance fragmentation, and humanitarian catastrophe across the Horn of Africa for generations to come.

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Editor's Note

Dear Reader,

We are excited to release the 48th bi-monthly issue of *The HORN Bulletin* (Vol. IX, Iss. II, 2026). We bring to you well-researched articles and analysis on topical issues and developments affecting the Horn of Africa. We welcome contributions from readers who wish to have their articles included in the HORN Bulletin. At HORN, we believe ideas are the currency of progress. Feel free to contact the Editor-in-Chief for more details at communications@horninstitute.org.

Hassan Khannenje, Ph.D.
Editor-in-Chief, The HORN Bulletin

Note:
The views expressed in this Bulletin are those of the authors and they do not necessarily reflect the position of the HORN Institute.

UPCOMING EVENT

The War in Iran: Strategic Lessons for the Horn of Africa

24 April 2026 | 3:00 PM – 4:30 PM (EAT)

This webinar will examine the evolving geopolitical dynamics surrounding the Iran conflict and their implications for the Horn of Africa. It will explore economic shocks, regional security risks, and strategic policy lessons for governments and practitioners in the region.

Rethinking Elections and Democratic Practice in Eastern Africa: Crisis, Adaptation, and the Future of Political Participation

30 April 2026 | 3:00 PM – 4:30 PM (EAT)

This session will critically assess the state of electoral integrity and democratic practice across Eastern Africa, focusing on shrinking civic space, youth engagement, and pathways for strengthening inclusive and credible political processes.


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