

# A GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE HORN OF AFRICA

## UMA ANÁLISE GEOPOLÍTICA DO CORNO DE ÁFRICA

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### Abstract

The number of foreign military missions in the Horn of Africa has increased substantially since 2001 and particularly over the past decade. The most visible aspect of this militarisation is the number of naval forces deployed in the region and the proliferation of military facilities in the coastal areas surrounding the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden. Over recent years, the conflict in Yemen has been an important focus of regional instability, and the likelihood of a military conflict between the blocs that support the opposing factions increased sharply in the second half of 2019. The aim of this article is to analyse the current geopolitical disputes in the Horn of Africa, where the US has a strong presence, as do other prominent regional players such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, other powers, including China, Russia, Qatar, Israel, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey, have been preparing to strengthen their presence in the region. This study identified relevant geopolitical disputes that can increase the risk of a military conflict between global and regional powers in the Horn of Africa.

**Keywords:** Horn of Africa, Bab el-Mandeb Strait, Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Yemen conflict.

### Resumo

*A região do Corno de África tem vindo a assistir a um aumento substancial no número de missões militares estrangeiras desde 2001, com particular relevo para a última década. O aspeto mais visível dessa militarização é o número de forças navais destacadas na região e a proliferação de instalações militares em áreas do litoral em redor do Estreito de Bab el-Mandeb, no Mar Vermelho e no Golfo de Áden. O conflito no Iémen tem sido nos últimos anos um relevante foco de instabilidade regional e no segundo semestre de 2019 a possibilidade de um confronto militar aberto entre os blocos que apoiam as fações oponentes subiu francamente. Pretende-se com este artigo analisar as disputas geopolíticas em curso no*

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*Corno de África. Os EUA mantêm uma presença forte e além de atores regionais de relevo, como a Arábia Saudita e o Irão, outras potências, incluindo a China, a Rússia, o Qatar, Israel, o Egito, os Emirados Árabes Unidos e a Turquia, têm vindo a posicionar-se para reforçarem a sua presença nesta região. Os resultados evidenciam a existência de relevantes disputas geopolíticas no Corno de África ao nível das potências globais e regionais, que podem elevar o risco de um conflito militar.*

**Palavras-Chave:** *Corno de África, Estreito de Bab el-Mandeb, Mar Vermelho, Golfo de Áden, conflito no Iémen.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Horn of Africa is the name given to the peninsula located in the northeastern corner of the African continent. It is bounded by the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to the north and comprises four countries: Eritrea, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Somalia (Figure 1) (Melvin, 2019).



**Figure 1 – Horn of Africa**

Source: World Atlas (2018).

The region includes the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which links the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean and is one of four critical chokepoints<sup>1</sup> for the international oil trade (Figure 2) (Cunningham, 2018). The other three are the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca and the Suez Canal (Cunningham, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> Marine areas of high geostrategic and geoeconomic value that cause natural maritime traffic congestion through major waterways (Popescu, 2016).



Figure 2 – Arabian Peninsula chokepoints and SUMED oil pipeline  
 Source: EIA (2019).

Figure 3 shows the volumes of oil and oil products that transited through the main international sea lanes in 2016, which confirm the relevance of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

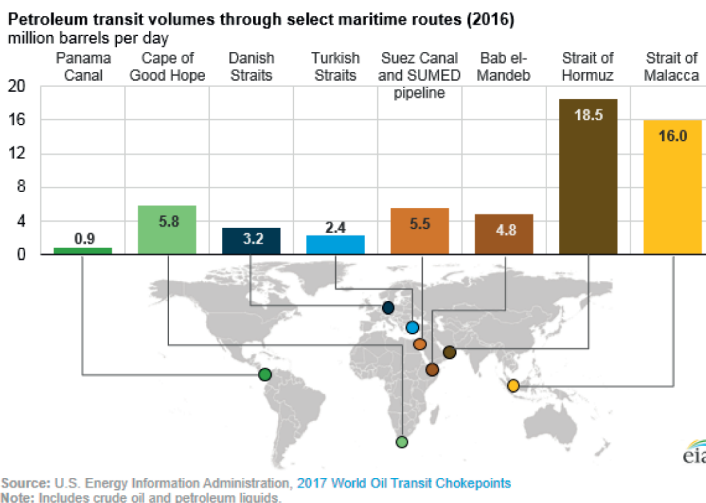


Figure 3 – Petroleum transit volumes through the most relevant chokepoints in 2016  
 Source: EIA (2017).

This strait is also vital for global food security. A 2017 Chatham House report lists 14 chokepoints of systemic importance for the global food trade, eight of which are maritime. The Strait of Bab el-Mandeb is one of those chokepoints (Bailey & Wellesley, 2017).

On the other hand, the Yemen conflict has aggravated tensions in a region that has already been scourged by maritime piracy, intense terrorist mobilisation, arms trafficking

and a constant influx of refugees from Africa to Yemen, among other phenomena (Al Maashi, 2017). These events have been going on for over five years and have led to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis that has already killed more than 10,000 people and left millions displaced, which, in turn, has contributed to the sharp increase in the global number of refugees.

The presence of violent extremist organizations linked to global jihadist groups in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and its adjacent waters also raises security concerns. Even though no terrorist attacks have occurred in these waters over recent years, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) controls a large strip of Yemeni territory, and a minor offshoot of ISIS (the acronym for Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) has been active in the region, as Figure 4 shows.

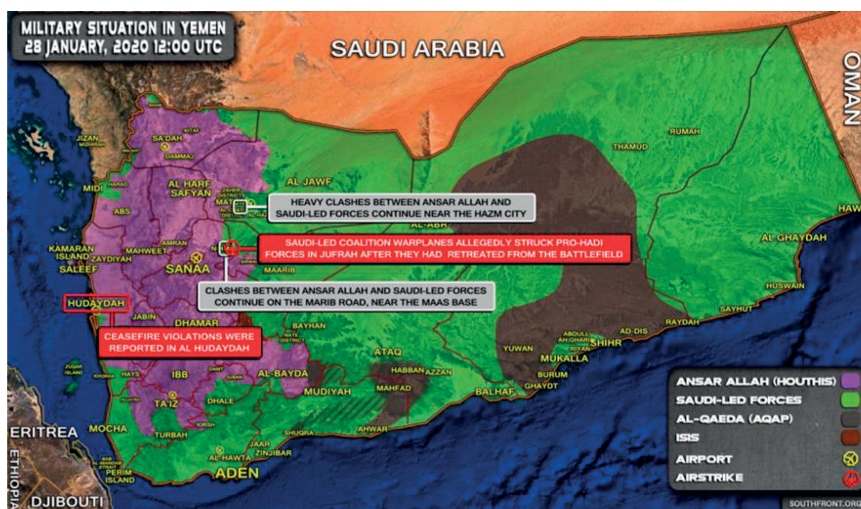


Figure 4 – Military situation in Yemen in January 2020

Source: South Front (2020).

As maritime shipping represents approximately 90% of all goods transported worldwide, attacks on chokepoints are a serious threat to international trade (Potheary, 2016). The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is no exception. Almost all maritime trade between Europe and Asia goes through this narrow waterway. If security in the region is compromised, shipping companies will be forced to use alternative routes to ship their products from Europe to Asia and abandon the Red Sea, which would be costly (circumnavigating the African continent via the Cape of Good Hope would add at least 3,000 nautical miles to the journey), or accept the increased risk when their ships travel through the strait (Potheary, 2016).

In addition to the economic and security risks for shipping companies, there are other risks which relate to the fact that even the military naval units deployed in the region cannot defend against unforeseen attacks from land, such as missiles launched from the coast of Yemen (in October 2016, missiles were fired at two US navy vessels, the *USS Mason* and the *USS Ponce*) or fast boats with explosive payloads, which are difficult to detect and intercept in an area where warships have extremely low manoeuvrability (Potheary, 2016).

In addition to the various regional actors, the US maintains a relevant military presence in the region and several other powers, including China, Russia, Israel and Turkey, have been preparing to strengthen their presence in the areas adjacent to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (Aljamra, 2019).

This study will be delimited in terms of content to State actors, both global (USA, China and Russia) and regional (Saudi Arabia, Iran, UAE, Egypt, Israel, Qatar and Turkey); in terms of space, it will examine the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the waters surrounding the Horn of Africa (particularly the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden); in terms of time, the study will cover the period from 2015 (the year the Yemeni conflict broke out) to the present day.

This work aims to show that, given its importance to international shipping and to the energy trade in particular, and, even more importantly, to the trade routes that link Asia to Europe, the Horn of Africa region (and its adjacent waters) is an important theatre of geopolitical rivalry and power posturing by various global and regional powers.

## 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

When the Suez Canal opened in 1869, it brought Europe and South East Asia closer and the Strait of Bab El-Mandeb became even more relevant. Merchant ships were now able to cross directly from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, which cut the distance from Asian ports to European ports by up to two thirds. The Bab El-Mandeb Strait has become one of the world's most important sea-lanes. One reason for this is that its width and depth allow ships of different types and dimensions (especially those with deeper drafts) to cross in opposite directions at the same time (Wood, 2018).

Although the Horn of Africa was once an active theatre of competition between the US and the Soviet Union, after the Cold War, and especially after the costly Battle of Mogadishu<sup>2</sup> in 1993, the international community generally lost interest in the region. However, since the late 1990s, organized crime networks, terrorism, maritime piracy and territorial disputes have become a threat to international trade ships travelling through the Red Sea, the Strait of Bab El-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden. In fact, although the crossing from the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea has remained open, since the turn of the 20th century (and especially over the last few years) these sources of insecurity have been compounded by the presence of state actors competing fiercely amongst themselves. The following chapters will address these disputes.

The evolution of the security situation since the onset of the 21st century and the high geostrategic and geoeconomic value of the region have drawn the attention of several powers, who are engaged in a race to build military bases. Djibouti, a nation with less than one million inhabitants, and that only became independent in 1977, currently has more foreign military bases than any other country in the world. This includes bases from the US (2002), Japan (2011), Italy (2012) and China (2017), in addition to a French naval base, which it

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<sup>2</sup> In December 1992, after the toppling of President Siad Barre (1991), an international taskforce was set up to disarm the opposing clans and ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid to the population. In March 1993, the UN Security Council sanctioned a peace enforcement operation. Aidid's party, the Somali National Alliance (SNA), became a problem for the international community as it frequently ambushed the international forces to loot relief supplies. The main goal of the UN force was to put an end to the actions of the SNA. A sixth attempt to capture General Aidid took place on 3 October 1993 in Mogadishu. The mission failed and many US soldiers were killed (Alvarenga, 2008).

has hosted for several years, and smaller facilities from other States (Safak, 2019).

Over the last decade, several countries have made significant investments in various ports in the Horn of Africa, often after signing trade agreements in return for establishing military bases (such as China in Djibouti, the UAE in Berbera, Somaliland, and Turkey in Mogadishu, Somalia). Figure 5 shows the military forces in the Horn of Africa region in 2019 (Melvin, 2019).

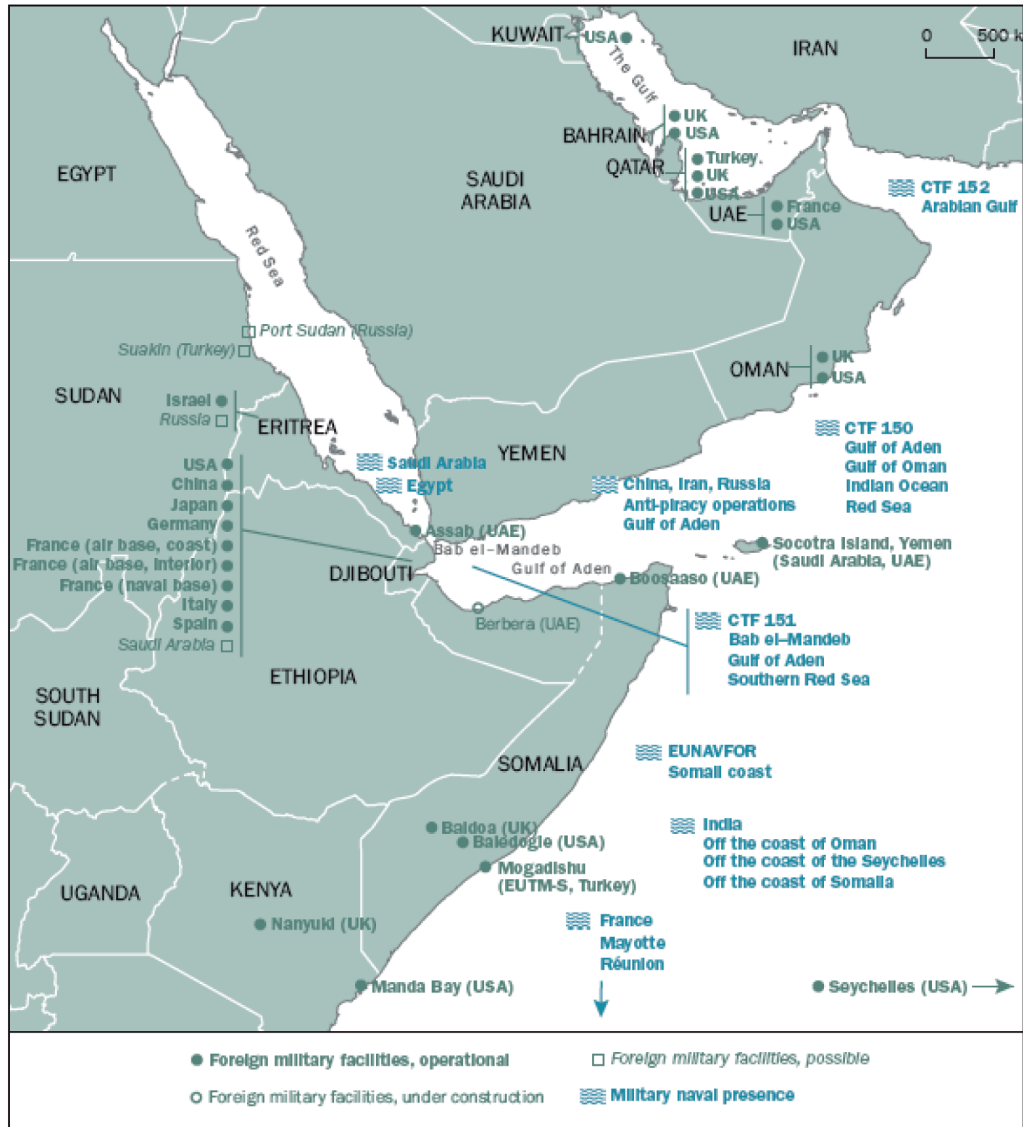


Figure 5 – International military bases and forces in the Horn of Africa in 2019

Source: Melvin (2019).

The growing number of foreign military bases (both built and planned) and the constant presence of military personnel of various nationalities in the nations of the Horn of Africa, particularly Djibouti, highlights the security, economic and regional geopolitical relevance of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and of the south coast of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (Safak, 2019).

### 3. GEOPOLITICAL FACTORS

Nogueira (2011, pp. 300-303) calls for geopolitical studies that address “factors that are not purely geographic”, which he considers essential to gain “a more holistic understanding of the relationship between societies and their environment”. He lists some of these non-geographic factors (which include history, temperament, language, religion, and forms of social organization) alongside traditional geographical factors (location, size, climate, geographical features, resources, and type of state), which he refers to as “structural factors”. These structural factors are compounded by political, economic, military and social factors, or “contextual factors”.

This chapter addresses these political, economic and military factors, as they appear to be the most important to assess the current geopolitical and geostrategic situation in the Horn of Africa and its adjacent waters, as well as to predict how it will develop.

#### 3.1. Global powers

This section examines the US, a superpower that has had a hegemonic presence throughout the Middle East (ME) and surrounding waters; China, a (re)emerging power that has been preparing to challenge the dominance of the US and return to a region where it had a strong presence centuries ago; and Russia, a revisionist power that is attempting to reclaim the status it had during the Cold War (when it was still the Soviet Union).

##### 3.1.1. United States of America

After over a decade and a half of costly, inconclusive and seemingly “endless” wars (in Iraq, Afghanistan and, more recently, Syria), the US policy for the ME has been thoroughly analysed, especially within the US. There is little consensus on the matter, and especially on how to compete with emerging powers like Russia and China. President Donald Trump was not the first to call for the withdrawal of US forces from the ME. His predecessor, President Barack Obama, also believed that after years of intense strategic investment in the ME, the US needed to reduce its involvement in the region. In fact, public support for continued military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan has been declining for several years (Edelman, 2019).

There have been calls for reducing and limiting American commitments in the region from both the Democratic and Republican parties. Some claim that the American people are “war-weary” and tired of an inconclusive involvement that seems to have done little to improve the region, and that there are as many (or more) radical jihadists now as there were

at the beginning of the century. Others argue that the US has created more chaos that it has prevented, and that addressing the region's many challenges (lack of democracy, gender inequality, lack of resources, among others) is beyond its ability (Edelman, 2019).

Vakil (2019) makes a similar point, stating that there is a widespread perception that the US may be preparing to leave the ME, and that this perception is based both on President Barack Obama's "leading from behind" policy and on President Donald Trump's "America first" policy, which reflects his views about the high costs of US-sponsored wars in the region<sup>3</sup>. Washington's policies for the ME have led to violent protracted state-building processes in Iraq and Afghanistan, which depleted US resources<sup>4</sup>, eroded public support, and led to the emergence of ISIS and its radical brand of terror (Vakil, 2019).

In economic terms, in the global order that emerged out of World War II, the North American policymakers considered the Middle East's energy resources a vital interest for themselves and for their allies in Europe and Asia. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter formally acknowledged the importance of preventing an external hostile power from gaining control over the region. His successors tried to prevent not only foreign powers but also any regional power from gaining hegemony in the region (Edelman, 2019).

However, over the last decade, the technological revolution in the energy sector (hydraulic fracturing, slant drilling, etc.) has enabled the US to exploit limited oil and natural gas (shale gas) reserves and become self-sufficient enough to begin exporting. Those in favour of cutting costs saw this as an excellent opportunity for the US to free itself from its commitments, as it no longer had a vital need for the ME's energy resources.

China's rise and Russia's revisionist ambitions pose a major challenge to the US inasmuch as both countries have been developing military capabilities that could threaten the US as the world's leading military power. Against this background, the US military base in Djibouti (an operational base built immediately after September 11 to target Al-Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia during the "War on Terror") has become increasingly relevant, not only because it is the only permanent US naval base in Africa but also due to its geostrategic location in the middle of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. However, as Figure 6 shows, in addition to the base in Djibouti, the US maintains significant military forces in the Persian Gulf, which enable it to block China and Russia's ambitions in the region.

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<sup>3</sup> Put it terms of human costs, about 224,000 to 258,000 people lost their lives as a direct result of these wars, including 125,000 civilians in Iraq. Many more died indirectly due to lack of drinking water, lack of medical care and malnutrition. At least 365,000 people were injured and 7.8 million were displaced (Trotta, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> A report from the Watson Institute at Brown University issued in November 2018 predicts that, by the end of 2019, the US will have spent about \$5.9 trillion on the "war on terror". This includes direct spending and obligations for future spending on post-9/11 war veterans (Crawford, 2018).

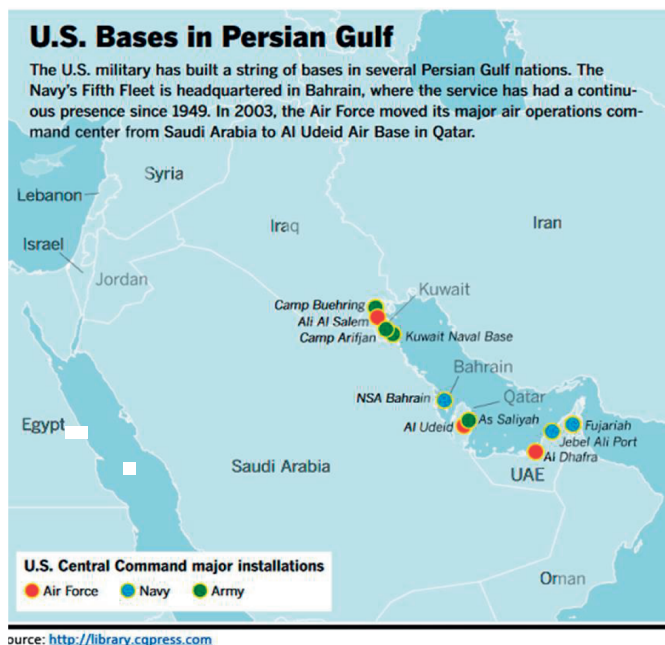


Figure 6 – US military forces in the Persian Gulf

Source: Hughes (2016).

### 3.1.2. China

According to Tomé (2019, p.72), “China’s rise has been one of the major changes in the global power structure over recent decades”. Thanks to this “resurgence”, China has been gaining ground on the other major powers and its “comprehensive national power” is beginning to rival that of the only global superpower, the US. Although the rhetoric coming out of Beijing is that the “Chinese military capabilities are purely defensive”, several initiatives over recent years have increased “concerns” from other actors (Tomé, 2019, p.79).

One example of this are China’s efforts to project power in the Indian Ocean, the motives for which are becoming increasingly clearer: to sustain its military forces in the Indian Ocean, China needs access to facilities at certain strategic locations<sup>5</sup>; on the other hand, Chinese leaders are rightly concerned about multiple risks and threats in the region, including the possibility of the United States disrupting Chinese supply lines in the event of a war (Cooper, 2018).

Thus, in political terms, China’s new military base in Djibouti can be considered its first power projection infrastructure, and its aim is to protect China’s national interests and act as a counterbalance to other relevant actors in the Indian Ocean, including the US (Jash,

<sup>5</sup> On 26 November 2015, Beijing confirmed its plans to build China’s first foreign naval military base in Djibouti, calling it an important step in the country’s strategic military development. On that occasion, Hong Lei, the spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reiterated Beijing’s intentions to play a more active role in ensuring regional peace and stability: “The construction of the relevant facilities will help China’s navy and army further participate in UN peacekeeping operations, carry out escort missions in the waters near Somalia and the Gulf of Aden, and provide humanitarian assistance” (Jash, 2015).

2015). This measure reflects the Chinese ambition that was once known as the “String of Pearls” – building naval bases in order to protect sea lines of communication, especially near chokepoints. However, this is a strategic change for China, whose 2015 White Paper on Defence states that “the traditional mentality that land outweighs the sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests” (The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2015).

From an economic perspective, the Indian Ocean’s importance stems from its crucial sea lanes, which form a strategic trade corridor. More than 80% of the world’s maritime oil trade goes through the Indian Ocean chokepoints (the straits of Ormuz, Malacca and Bab el-Mandeb). The Chinese economy depends on these trade routes, which are absolutely vital to deliver both the energy imports that Beijing needs and the products it exports. Naturally, the Chinese government wishes to ensure security along these sea lines of communication in order to protect its economic interests, particularly those related to the implementation of its most ambitious project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). To do so, it needs to strengthen its presence and enhance its military activities by building bases and becoming a key player in the region (Jash, 2015).

In military terms, the Djibouti base provides China the ability to respond to threats to freedom of navigation along the entire Arabian Peninsula coast (and not only the Bab el-Mandeb Strait), which has long been under US control. Perhaps more importantly, the military base in Djibouti will enable Beijing to expand and sustain its sea denial<sup>6</sup> capabilities, such as deploying submarines across the Indian Ocean and strategic anti-access/area denial resources (A2/AD), which essentially consist of creating a layer of defence in depth around the area to be protected, preventing or at least making it difficult for potential attackers to approach (Jash, 2015).

### **3.1.3. Russia**

Tomé (2018. p.92) states that “the ambition to restore its sphere of influence is a priority for Putin’s Russia” and that “certain practices” are proof of “Russia’s expansionist behaviour”. The Horn of Africa is simply another region where this posture has manifested itself, as the section below will demonstrate.

In political terms, Russia (then the Soviet Union) has recognised the geostrategic importance of the Gulf of Aden since the establishment of South Yemen in 1967. During the 1970s, it used its alliance with South Yemen to build a naval base in Aden and facilities on the island of Socotra. Moscow lost those facilities with the unification of Yemen in 1990, which coincided with the Russian withdrawal of forces and progressive detachment from the ME since 1991 (Grygiel, 2019).

Russia’s ambitions of having (again) a naval base close to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait date back to 2009. Later, in August 2017, the former commander-in-chief of the Russian Navy Feliks Gromov

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<sup>6</sup> Conceptually, sea denial consists in preventing an opponent from using a specific area of the sea for a given period of time. Therefore, this Chinese military base is all the more relevant because it allows Beijing to expand its naval capabilities by preventing rival powers from using certain areas of the sea (Jash, 2015).

stated that establishing a Russian naval base near the Gulf of Aden trade routes was crucial. Not long after, in what appeared to be a concerted effort, the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow described the island of Socotra in Yemen as the ideal site to build that base (Ramani, 2018).

Moscow has been developing a policy of “strategic nonalignment”<sup>7</sup> in Yemen, which can be explained by its material interests in the Gulf of Aden, its aspirations of projecting soft power in the ME through the international television channel Russian Today (RT) and its version in Arabic, RT Arabic, which is already one of the three largest TV networks in the region (Suchkov, 2015), and the desire to balance the conflicting interests of the other powers in the region. By building bridges with the most influential regional actors in Yemen and showing its ability to maintain good relations with the main opposing factions, Russia is attempting to expand its influence over the conflict resolution process (Ramani, 2019).

On the other hand, Moscow has used the US’s hesitation to its advantage, making approaches to Egypt, a traditional US ally in the region. In August 2017, after the Trump administration cut its economic and military aid to Cairo due to the country’s violations of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, Russia quickly moved to fill the void left by the US, signing several arms sales agreements, including the sale of 50 MiG-29 fighter aircraft and 46 helicopters (the naval version of the Kamov Ka-52 Alligator) for use in the two Mistral-class amphibious assault ships that Cairo acquired from France in September 2015 (Zilberman & Shaker, 2018). Moscow has also attempted a rapprochement to Saudi Arabia, another of Washington’s traditional allies, and even proposed the creation of an organization similar to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe for the Persian Gulf, an old idea that it revisited in July 2019 (Belenkaya, 2019).

In economic terms, during a meeting on 31 August 2018, in Sochi, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov announced Moscow’s plans to establish a logistics centre in Eritrea to increase the volume of agricultural and mineral products transiting through the Red Sea (TesfaNews, 2018). The country has also explored the possibility of building a naval base in Somaliland, which would provide it access to the important commercial port of Berbera (Berg & Meester, 2018).

In military terms, by following a strategy of neutrality in Yemen, Russia aims to guarantee access to a military base in the Gulf of Aden, to improve its reputation in the ME and to strengthen its relationship with key regional partners. Once the country gains access to a base in Yemen, building a naval base in Somaliland would allow it to link the Horn of Africa (North Somalia) to the Arabian Peninsula (South West Yemen) (Ramani, 2018).

### 3.2. Regional powers

This subchapter will describe the most influential powers in the region. Saudi Arabia and Iran compete for supremacy in the region and support opposing factions in the Yemen

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<sup>7</sup> To broaden its cooperation with Iran, Russia has defended Tehran against accusations of supplying ballistic missiles to the Houthis. In December 2018, it blocked a US-sponsored draft UN Security Council resolution condemning Iran’s support to the rebels. To appease to Saudi Arabia, the US supported Hadi as the legitimate President of Yemen, on the condition that he be recognized as such by the United Nations, and criticized the Houthi radicalization that followed the assassination of former President Saleh, denouncing the Houthi missile strikes on oil tankers travelling through the Bab el-Mandeb strait (Ramani, 2019).

conflict, which Soage (2017, p.2) called the “new Middle East Cold War”. The UAE and Egypt are Riyadh’s allies in the Yemen conflict, and Israel, Qatar and Turkey play an increasingly larger role in the alliances (formal and otherwise) that have emerged in the Horn of Africa and its surrounding waters.

### **3.2.1. Saudi Arabia**

In political terms, the reforms implemented by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman since 2017 under the “2030 vision” banner focus almost exclusively on reducing the country’s dependence on oil and on developing a productivity-driven economy (Soage, 2017, p.13). Paradoxically, these reforms do nothing to give voice to the population or to their problems, and political activists, women’s rights advocates, journalists and religious leaders (among others groups of citizens) are often persecuted (El Yaakoubi, 2018).

However, Riyadh has been attempting to extend its influence in the region through at least two major diplomatic initiatives: the signing in of the historic peace agreement between former enemies Ethiopia and Eritrea in September 2018, in Jeddah, a port city on the Red Sea, and the establishment of an Arab coalition to promote stability in Yemen and support the government of President Abd-Rabbuh Mansour Hadi. Its goals are to secure its south border, to contain Iran’s expansionist ambitions, to combat terrorist threats and to ensure security in the region. Finally, Saudi Arabia has attempted to isolate Qatar with the support of the UAE (and later of Bahrain and Egypt) since both countries became rivals in 2017. The four states issued joint statements accusing Qatar of supporting terrorist groups and cut all land, sea and air links to the country as a response (The Washington Post, 2017a).

In economic terms, Saudi Arabia has the world’s second largest oil reserve and sixth largest natural gas reserve. This sector represents approximately 70% of government revenue (Ratner, 2018). On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has long used the considerable financial resources it has amassed from its oil exports as a tool of its foreign policy in the region. To achieve its economic goals in the Horn of Africa, it has made significant investments on food production and regional trade, as well as on ensuring strategic objectives such as denying Iran access to ports along one of the region’s main supply lines (Berg & Meester, 2018).

In military terms, Saudi Arabia leads the Arab coalition against the Houthis in Yemen. In addition to carrying out air raids against rebel positions and placing an embargo on merchant ships docking in ports under its control, it has deployed ground forces to support President Hadi’s forces, mainly in South Yemen. Finally, Saudi Arabia has finalised an agreement to build a military base in Djibouti, which will enable it to project more power (Berg & Meester, 2018).

### **3.2.2. Iran**

In political terms, the ideology promoted by Iran encourages an “Islamic awakening” that is not necessarily based on the Khomeinist principle of *Wilayat al-Faqih*, a Shiite Islamic system of government where the clergy has precedence over the State (Addadh, 2019), but which can be adapted to the specific conditions of different countries. This pleases many Muslims (not only Persians) because it focuses on people and gives them a more active voice

in many decisions that affect them. Moreover, Iran's traditional rhetoric of resistance against Israel and the USA is echoed in the streets of many Arab countries, whose populations have always looked to those countries with suspicion, and even removes some legitimacy from Riyadh, Washington's traditional ally (Soage, 2017, p.13).

On the other hand, Tehran can project its influence through proxy forces: the Twelvers (in Lebanon and Iraq), a school that considers the Twelve Imams to be the only legitimate successors of Prophet Muhammad, from Ali ibn Abu Talib (600-661 CE) to Muhammad ibn Hassan (869 CE-present), the twelfth imam who they believe will one day rise to bring peace and justice to the world and become humanity's saviour (Tristram, 2019); the Alawis (in Syria), a Shiite branch that reveres Ali ibn Abi Talib, cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad and the first imam of the Twelver school (Spencer, 2016); the Zaydis (in Yemen), a Shiite school that takes the name of Zayd b. Ali, the great-grandson of Imam Ali, which is distinct from the majority Shiite branch and rejects the doctrine that only Ali's descendants are eligible for the Imamate (Washington Examiner, 2014). Furthermore, the Iranian leaders make a point of supporting Sunni Muslims, particularly in Palestine, and of denouncing Takfiri groups (a radical, fundamentalist ideology preached by ultra-orthodox Islamists against moderate Arabs and Shiites), including ISIS, as part of a Western ploy to tarnish the reputation of Islam (Soage, 2017, p. 14).

In military terms, Iran has supported the Houthi movement in Yemen against the forces of the Mansur Hadi government as part of a broader military strategy through which Tehran aims to dominate the region from the Strait of Hormuz to the Red Sea, including the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb (Zaouaq, 2018).

In economic terms, Iran is one of the region's leading exporters of hydrocarbons and the country aims to achieve regional hegemony by controlling two straits which are absolutely vital for international shipping (and particularly for the energy trade): the Bab el-Mandeb and Hormuz straits. The overwhelming majority of Iran's exports, which are essential for the country's economic development, transit through the Strait of Strait of Hormuz (Ratner, 2018).

### 3.2.3. Egypt

In political terms, Egypt aims to strengthen regional cooperation on maritime affairs to respond to a growing number of multidimensional challenges. To that end, in September 2019, Egyptian warships and Special Forces participated in the Red Wave II exercise in Saudi territorial waters alongside naval units and Special Forces from Jordan, Djibouti, Sudan and Yemen. Egypt had already participated in the Red Wave I exercise in December 2018, also organized by Saudi Arabia (Khan, 2019). The construction of new naval bases, and especially of the Ras Banas base in the south-east of the country, in the middle of the Red Sea, and the creation of the Southern Fleet Command, are also part of its strategy (Khan, 2019). Cairo has also intensified its naval activity in the Red Sea to support the Arab coalition in Yemen (Mahmood, 2019). To that end, since May 2015, it has four warships deployed in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (Shay, 2017).

With regards to Egypt's regional allies and enemies, in addition to cooperating with Saudi Arabia, the country has enhanced its cooperation with Israel. However, recently discovered

energy resources have led both States to compete for offshore natural gas in the eastern Mediterranean. On the other hand, Egypt has been distancing itself from Turkey, mainly due to Ankara's support to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) (Khan, 2019). However, it has also been turning away from its traditional ally, the US, to strengthen ties with Russia. In May 2018, Egypt and Russia signed an agreement in which Moscow committed to establishing a Russian Industrial Zone in the Suez Canal Economic Zone. Egypt expects this project to attract up to \$70 billion in investment and create 35,000 jobs (Zilberman & Shaker, 2018).

In military terms, Egypt possesses the most robust armed forces in the Arab world (Deutsche Welle, 2019) and has invested in acquiring naval assets to modernise and expand its naval capabilities. The new acquisitions include two French-made amphibious assault ships (Mistral class), four German-made Type 209 submarines, six MEKO A-200 frigates, also German, and one French FREMM frigate (Khan, 2019).

In economic terms, ensuring maritime security in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea is crucial for Egypt, as the country depends on regular maritime traffic through these areas for its Suez Canal revenues. The Egyptian authorities expect the current \$5.3 billion in revenues to reach \$13.2 billion by 2023 (Suez Canal Authority, 2020).

#### **3.2.4. United Arab Emirates**

Al Maashi (2017, p.47) states that “within the geographic strategic area that surrounds the Strait of Bab Al-Mandab, there are two strategic naval fringes”. The first runs from the northwest coast of Yemen to the port of Do'bab, adjacent to the strait, and extends to the opposite East African coast, from the port of Massawa (Eritrea) to the port of Djibouti. The second starts in the Gulf of Aden, runs along the southern coast of Yemen and the northern coast of Somalia from the port of Berbera to the port of Bosasso (Puntland).

According to Ardemagni (2018, p.7), in political terms, the UAE is one of the most active ME actors in the “Aden regional security complex” and is able to project influence on both naval fringes. According to Al Maashi (2017, p.54), this is largely due to the Yemen conflict, which he considers the “main driving force behind the UAE's interests [in the region]”. The country's priorities can be divided into four areas: counter-terrorism operations against al-Qaeda; stabilising the areas liberated from Houthi militias and Saleh's forces; training Yemeni government forces; and establishing the UAE as an economic centre of reference in the region.

In economic terms, Abu Dhabi has an ambitious “strategy of building a chain of ports” from South Yemen to the Horn of Africa, a plan that has some similarities to the Chinese BRI. The Dubai Ports World (DP World) initiative, widely considered an important instrument of the UAE' foreign policy (Berg & Meester, 2018), has won tenders to manage several commercial ports in East Africa: Djibouti, Berbera, Bosasso, Kismayo and Barawe (South Somalia).

In military terms, the UAE withdrew its forces from Djibouti shortly after the onset of the Yemen war and moved them to Assab, Eritrea, where it now holds a 30-year lease for military use of the port (Berg & Meester, 2018). The country is currently building another base in Berbera, without formal authorisation from the Federal Government of Somalia, which will become Abu Dhabi's second most important military outpost in East Africa (Ardemagni, 2018). In return for its support to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the conflict with Qatar,

Eritrea received assistance from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi in the form of oil supplies and help modernising the nation's electrical grid. This has contributed to a further cooling of relations between the Somali Federal Government and the UAE, which had started to deteriorate in 2017, when Somalia opted for neutrality instead of siding with the Persian Gulf monarchies against Qatar in the diplomatic dispute that opposed them (Horseed Media, 2020).

### 3.2.5. Israel

States hostile to Israel have attempted to establish positions along the routes that run through the southern Gulf of Eilat and the Suez Canal, which may pose a threat to Israeli security (Guzansky & Eran, 2018). According to Melvin (2019, p.10), Israel has held military facilities in Eritrea since 2012 (in the Dahlak archipelago and in Massawa, as well as a listening post in Emba Soira to monitor Tehran's activities in the Red Sea).

In political terms, the Yemen conflict has not been a focus of Israel's national security discourse; however, this posture may change if long-range, high-precision missiles<sup>8</sup> launched from Houthi-controlled territory are able to reach Israel, or if the rebels gain control over the West Coast of Yemen from North Hodeidah to al-Luhaya (Heistein & Guzanski, 2019).

In military terms, Hezbollah, long considered a strategic threat to Israel, has learned important lessons from its involvement in the Yemen conflict, where it provides training to Houthi operatives and where it is learning to fight States with advanced weapons systems and air superiority. The Hezbollah forces have also seen drones used against hostile air defence batteries, precision missiles launched against critical infrastructures and air defences used against US aircraft. The fact that these experiences, both the successes and the failures, have provided Hezbollah with expertise that it can use in future conflicts with Israel is another cause for concern (Heistein & Guzanski, 2019).

In economic terms, about \$15 billion in goods transit to and from Israel through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait every year, which means that these goods also travel through Houthi-controlled territory. The Houthi militias have shown animosity towards Israel and have the ability to mine the seafloor, launch anti-ship missiles and use surface drones with explosive payloads to threaten maritime traffic to and from Israel (Heistein & Guzanski, 2019). Finally, since Benjamin Netanyahu's tour of East Africa in July 2016, thousands of Israelis have worked in several major economic centres in East Africa, particularly in the trade, agricultural management, and service sectors, and some Israeli companies have a monopoly on various economic activities in several states (Al Jazeera, 2016).

### 3.2.6. Qatar

According to Rajab (2019) and Wahab (2019), Yemen has witnessed a heated internal dispute between Islamic groups supported by various powers, one of which is Qatar. In political terms, Doha may be using the Al-Islah movement, the political arm of the local MB, to achieve its

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<sup>8</sup> Even though it is unlikely that the Yemeni rebels will be able to develop such advanced missiles (which resemble Iranian models) in the midst of a war, it is far more likely that in only a few years they could acquire these weapons from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Heistein & Guzanski, 2019).

goals in Yemen in an attempt to increase its influence on the government and on the Yemeni population. The Al-Ruwiq camp in Marib (central Yemen) is funded by Qatar. This region is a strategic target for the MB's plans to establish an emirate in Yemen (Rajab, 2019).

In military terms, Qatar has competed for regional influence in the Horn of Africa with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, a competition that has spread to Somalia. The recent rapprochement between Somaliland and Puntland (and between the UAE and Saudi Arabia) has been denounced by both the Somali Parliament and President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, who has ties with Qatar and Turkey.

With regards to its regional allies, Turkey took Doha's side in the dispute with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt after the 2017 Persian Gulf crisis that divided the Arab monarchies. The two countries sealed their alliance when Turkey opened its first ME military base in Qatar in April 2016 (Mourad, 2018). During the crisis, Iran denounced the other monarchies of the Persian Gulf and Egypt for what it called a "siege on Qatar" and declared it would support Doha in that dispute (Al Jazeera, 2017).

In economic terms, Qatar has used Islamic groups to expand its influence in the region and undermine the economic interests of its rivals on the Arabian Peninsula (Wahab, 2019). According to The New York Times (2019), the attack on the port of Bosaso in May 2019 was motivated by Doha's attempt to remove DP World, a UAE-based company, from the port's administration and transfer it to Qatar. Doha and Tehran's economic strategies are also aligned, as both countries share a major gas field in the Persian Gulf (North Field), which accounts for the majority of Qatar's gas production (Iran Times, 2014). In total, Qatar holds the world's third largest gas reserve (CIA, 2019). Qatar's interests in Sudan are also aligned with Turkey's. After the rapprochement between Ankara and Khartoum, Doha agreed to invest \$4 billion on developing and managing the Suakin port (Mourad, 2018).

### 3.2.7. Turkey

In political terms, Ankara has continued to support the Somali president and has made substantial investments in the country (especially in Mogadishu), including building schools, hospitals and other facilities and creating scholarships for Somalis who wish to attend Turkish universities. The flourishing ties between the two States have allowed Ankara to build its largest foreign embassy in Somalia (Berg & Meester, 2018).

Qatar is one of the countries on Turkey's map of regional allies. The rapprochement between the two countries started in 2017, in the wake of the Persian Gulf crisis, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt broke off diplomatic relations with Qatar, accusing it of supporting terrorist groups<sup>9</sup> (The Washington Post, 2017a). The Ankara government offered political support to Doha during and after the crisis. However, there is another, more profound reason for Turkey's support of Qatar: both defend the vision for the ME Sunni countries that was set in motion by the "Arab Spring". On the opposite side are Saudi

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<sup>9</sup> There are several theories that attempt to explain why the situation has degenerated to such an extreme degree. One reason may have been a statement published on Qatar's official website, which accused the emir of making exculpatory comments about Iran and the Shiite group Hezbollah. Even after Doha denied making any such statements, rather than blaming them on hackers, the Saudi and UAE media continued to report them as fact (The Washington Post, 2017b).

Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and the current Egyptian government of President al-Sisi (France 24, 2017).

In economic terms, Ankara has taken a cue from other regional actors and attempted to link the construction of military bases to agreements to manage commercial ports. In September 2014, Turkish company Al-Bayrak Group took over the administration of the Mogadishu port (Mourad, 2018). Turkey has also approached Sudan. The US lifted its sanctions on the country in October 2017, and President Erdogan visited Khartoum in December that same year. The two countries signed agreements for the construction of the new Khartoum airport and for the production of cotton, electricity and the construction of grain silos (Berg & Meester, 2018), the most important of which was an agreement granting temporarily rights to the island of Suakin (a former Ottoman port city in northeast Sudan on the Red Sea) to Turkey. In return, Turkey agreed to rebuild the port, including docks for maintenance of civilian and military ships (Mourad, 2018).

In military terms, in September 2017 Ankara gained access to a base in Mogadishu, its largest military base abroad, massively strengthening its presence in East Africa (Berg & Meester, 2018).

#### **4. ANALYSIS OF GEOPOLITICAL INTERACTIONS**

This section analyses the potential interests, initiatives and objectives of the global and regional powers covered in this study to identify areas of compromise, areas that may lead to conflict and areas that are likely to lead to conflict, as well as relationships of opposition and collaboration between them.

##### **4.1. Global powers**

The visible military presence of global powers in the region is a testament to the international relevance of the Horn of Africa and adjacent waters. The US and China have a robust military presence in Djibouti, and Russia has been developing several initiatives that will enable it to return to a region where it had a foothold during the Cold War as the then Soviet Union. The list below describes the global actors and their key interests, initiatives and objectives in the region:

##### **4.1.1. United States of America**

Key interests:

- Combating terrorist groups in Somalia and Yemen;
- Preventing China's rise and neutralising Russia's revisionist ambitions in the West Indian Ocean;
- Supporting the Arab coalition in the Yemen conflict;
- Redefining the role of the US in the ME;
- Preventing any regional power from controlling the Horn of Africa sea lanes.

Most relevant initiatives:

- Establishing a first military base in Africa (in Djibouti);

- Maintaining a strong military presence in Djibouti and the Persian Gulf.

Objectives:

- Winning the “war on terror”;
- Ensuring military hegemony in the West Indian Ocean;
- Isolating Iran and weakening the Houthi rebels in Yemen;
- Ensuring energy security in the Arabian Peninsula sea lanes;
- Gaining a military edge on China and Russia at the top end of the conflict spectrum;
- Refocusing its defence priorities towards East Asia.

#### **4.1.2. China**

Key interests:

- Ensuring the security of sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea;

- Gaining strategic depth;
- Expanding its naval capabilities in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea;
- Strengthening ties with its regional ally (Pakistan);
- Reinforcing its military presence in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea.

Most relevant initiatives:

- Building a military base in Djibouti;
- Managing the Gwadar port (Pakistan).

Objectives:

- Protecting energy imports;
- Protecting the BRI project;
- Gaining reputation as a major power in a strategic region;
- Ensuring tactical advantage in a future conflict;
- Consolidating the transition from continental power to continental and maritime power;
- Acting as a counterbalance for the traditional US influence in the region.

#### **4.1.3. Russia**

Key interests:

- Ensuring access to the Port of Aden and the Island of Socotra in Yemen;
- Building a military base in Somaliland;
- Establishing a logistics centre in Eritrea;
- Rehabilitating its reputation as a rigid, authoritarian state;
- Undermining the alliance between the US and the Arab coalition in the Yemen conflict.

Most relevant initiatives:

- Projecting soft power in the Horn of Africa region;
- Adopting a policy of strategic neutrality in Yemen.

Objectives:

- Regaining its status as a key power in the region;
- Expanding its economic interests in the region;

- Creating a regional hub to link the Horn of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula;
- Influencing the resolution of the Yemeni conflict;
- Changing the region's negative perception of Russia;
- Ensuring the balance of power in the region.

#### 4.2. Geopolitical interactions between global powers

The analysis identified areas of compromise, areas of possible conflict and areas of probable conflict, that is, areas that are not expected to lead to conflict in the near future, areas where overarching events may lead to conflict, and areas of latent conflict. Figure 7 briefly illustrates the relationships of collaboration and opposition between the three powers.

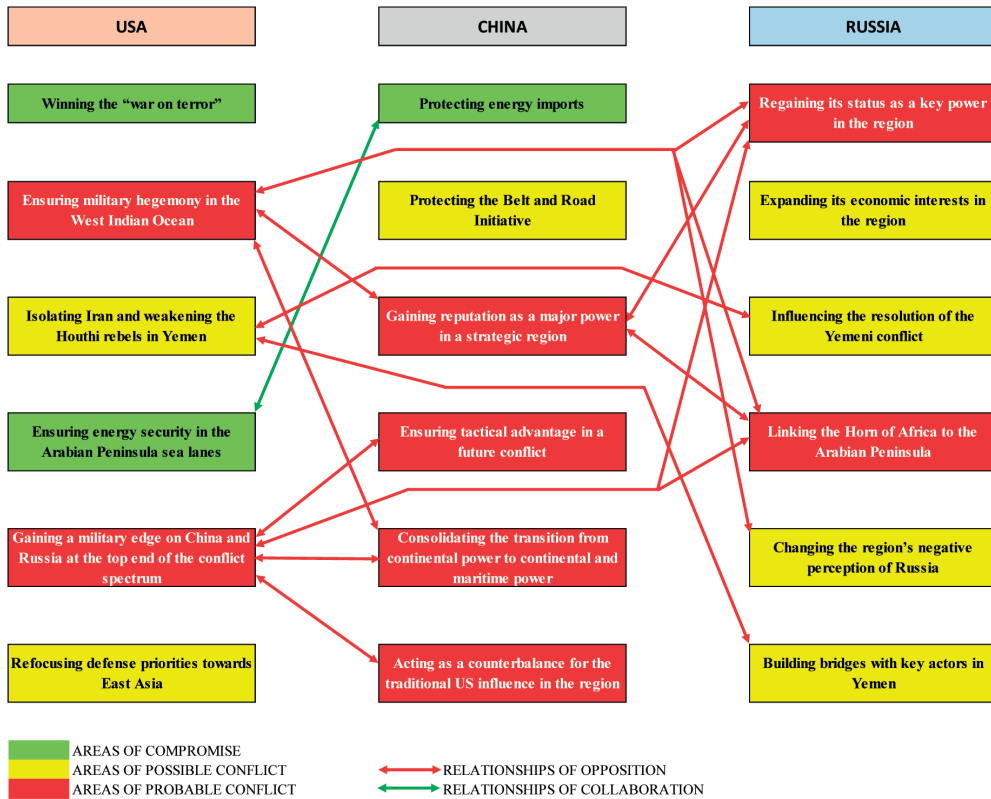


Figure 7 – Geopolitical interactions between global powers

#### 4.3. Regional powers

This section will describe the regional geopolitical rivalries at play in the waters of the Horn of Africa, the most relevant of which is the ongoing competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The longstanding disputes between these two ME powers have escalated over recent years as a result of the suspension of diplomatic relations between the Saudis and the Iranians in 2016, after the looting of the Saudi embassy in Tehran by

a mob protesting the execution of prominent Shiite cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr by Saudi Arabia.

Below are the most relevant interests, initiatives and objectives of the regional actors covered in this study.

#### **4.3.1. Saudi Arabia**

Key interests:

- Supporting the Mansour Hadi government in the Yemen conflict;
- Preventing Qatar from gaining access to bases and ports in the Horn of Africa;
- Containing the Iranian presence in the Horn of Africa.

Most relevant initiatives:

- Establishing an Arab coalition to combat the Houthi militias in Yemen;
- Imposing a boycott on Qatar;
- Establishing its first foreign military base in Djibouti.

Objectives:

- Broadening its influence in the region;
- Isolating Qatar;
- Isolating Iran.

#### **4.3.2. Iran**

Key interests:

- Projecting its influence in the region through proxy forces;
- Exporting the “Islamic awakening” to States with significant Shiite populations as well as to Saudi Arabia’s oil-rich eastern provinces;
- Supporting the Houthi militias in the Yemen conflict.

Most relevant initiatives:

- Maintaining its rhetoric of opposition to Israel and the US;
- Promoting a revolutionary agenda in the ME;
- Maintaining its support to Sunni communities, particularly in Palestine.

Objectives:

- Obtaining regional hegemony;
- Damaging the reputation of Saudi Arabia in the Muslim world;
- Gaining control over the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

#### **4.3.3. Egypt**

Key interests:

- Playing a key role in ensuring the security of the waters of the Horn of Africa;
- Protecting its Suez Canal revenues;
- Enhancing regional cooperation with traditional allies Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as with Israel.

Most relevant initiatives:

- Building the Ras Banas naval base in the Red Sea;
- Acquiring more naval capabilities;
- Maintaining naval forces in the areas adjacent to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to support the Arab coalition in the Yemen conflict.

Objectives:

- Isolating Iran;
- Isolating Qatar;
- Straightening relations with Russia.

#### **4.3.4. UAE**

Key interests:

- Diversifying its economic dependence on hydrocarbon extraction and trade;
- Supporting the Mansour Hadi government in the Yemen conflict;
- Building a “strategic chain of ports” linking South Yemen to the Horn of Africa.

Most relevant initiatives:

- Operating a military base in the coast city of Assab (Eritrea);
- Managing the commercial ports of Berbera (Somaliland) and Bosasso (Puntland);
- Building a military base in Berbera.

Objectives:

- Isolating Iran;
- Isolating Qatar;
- Projecting influence and power in the Horn of Africa region.

#### **4.3.5. Israel**

Key interests:

- Preventing attacks from Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen from reaching Israel;
- Preventing Iran from having a standing naval presence in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea;

- Preventing Hezbollah from using the combat experience it gained in Yemen to attack Israel.

Most relevant initiatives:

- Monitoring Iran’s activities in the Red Sea and preventing Hezbollah militias from using the expertise it acquired in the Yemen conflict;
- Monitoring the areas under Houthi control in Yemen’s west coast, from North Hodeidah to al-Luhaya;
- Developing initiatives to ensure that Israeli companies maintain their economic monopolies in several East African nations.

Objectives:

- Ensuring Israel’s national security;
- Ensuring the security of the trade ships travelling to and from Israel through the Horn of Africa sea lanes;
- Isolating Iran.

#### **4.3.6. Qatar**

Key interests:

- Maintaining an independent foreign policy that opposes Saudi interests;
- Defending the “Arab Spring” vision for the ME Sunni countries;
- Increasing its regional influence in the Horn of Africa.

Most relevant initiatives:

- Forming a block with Turkey and establishing a partnership with Sudan to rebuild the old port city of Suakin;
- Using Islamic groups linked to the MB to expand its influence in the region;
- Undermining the interests of its Arabian Peninsula rivals in the Horn of Africa.

Objectives:

- Maintaining good relations with Turkey;
  - Maintaining its alliance with Somalia;
- Straitening relations with Sudan.

#### **4.3.7. Turkey**

Key interests:

- Having a strong military presence in Sudan, including a base on the island of Suakin;
- Defending the “Arab Spring” vision for the ME Sunni countries;
- Maintaining good relations with Qatar.

Most relevant initiatives:

- Straitening relations with Djibouti to eventually establish a new military base there;
- Supporting the President of Somalia and the Somali Central Government;
- Continuing to support Qatar in its dispute with the other Persian Gulf monarchies;

Objectives:

- Maintaining strong ties with Qatar;
- Expanding its regional influence;
- Maintaining close relations with Sudan.

#### **4.4. Geopolitical interactions between regional powers**

The above analysis shows that the government of President Hadi in Yemen has the support of a Sunni coalition consisting of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt. This bloc has interests in common with Israel, as the country wishes to isolate Iran and prevent it from gaining ground in the region. This is not only a matter of national security; it is a way to ensure the security of maritime shipping to and from Israel through the waters of the Horn of Africa.

Iran leads the Shiite bloc and has proxy forces in various parts of the region where Saudi Arabia has interests, from Lebanon to Yemen. Its support to the Houthi militias in Yemen is part of an attempt to gain control over the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, as this would put Tehran in an extremely advantageous position in the region. On the other hand, a military conflict so close to Riyadh’s borders generates fear and uncertainty in its greatest

regional rival, Saudi Arabia, which is in Tehran’s best interest. Finally, Iran wishes to further weaken the Saudi position through an “Islamic awakening” that opposes the rigid reforms implemented by Riyadh in 2017, and which is thus supported by many Muslims. At the same time, Iran has used a constant rhetoric of opposition to the US and Israel, which is welcomed by Shiite Muslims but also by some Sunni Muslims, who continue to look with suspicion to these countries.

The third bloc is formed by Turkey and Qatar, countries with a history of good relations, especially since 2017, when the other Persian Gulf monarchies attempted to isolate Doha for having a foreign policy that ran counter to the interests of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Since Turkey gave its political support to Qatar, both countries have maintained and even strengthened their ties, as both defend the vision for the majority of the ME’s Sunni nations that was set in motion during the “Arab Spring”.

Figure 8 identifies the areas of compromise and the areas of possible and probable conflict between the different blocks and / or nations covered in this study, as well as the relationships of collaboration and opposition between them.

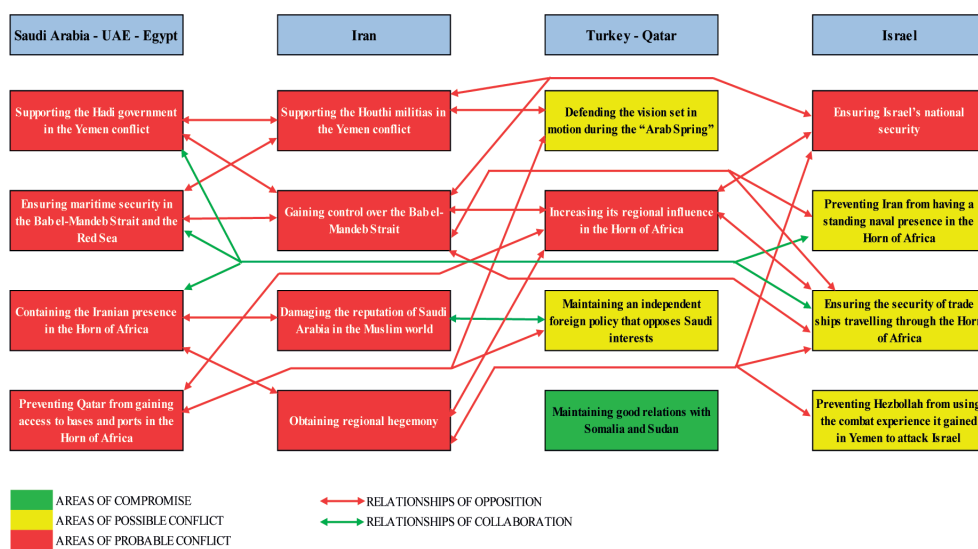


Figure 8 – Geopolitical interactions between regional powers

#### 4.5. Relationships between the different powers

Having analysed the interactions between the global powers and regional powers in the previous subchapters, it was possible to identify relationships of cooperation and conflict between all of them, which Figure 9 summarises.

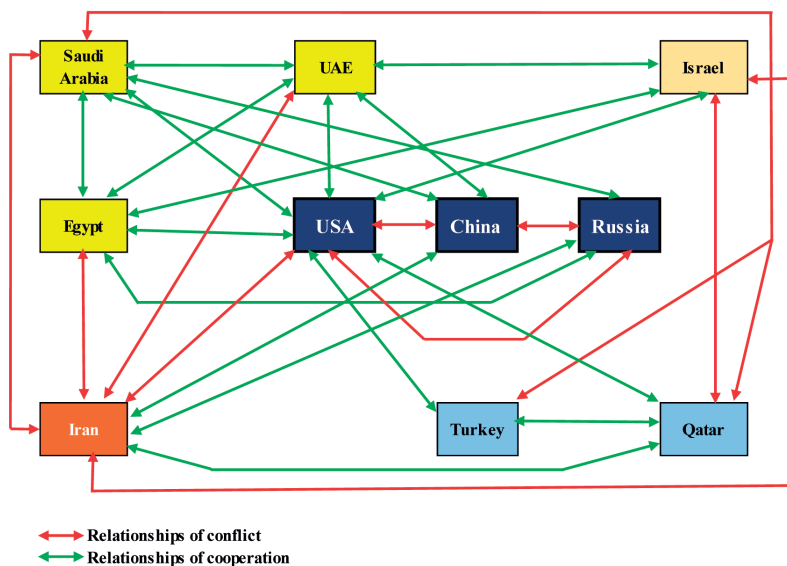


Figure 9 – Relationships between the different powers

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Over recent years, the Horn of Africa has become a theatre of competition between global and regional powers. Foreign powers have attempted to consolidate their presence in the region, particularly in African states, in an effort to gain access to distant regions and project power far beyond their natural borders. The involvement of multiple actors with conflicting interests has led to a militarisation of the region. The number of military bases in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden has increased and there are plans to build more in the future (some of which are already under construction).

With regards to the global powers, while the US has not yet defined its intentions regarding the role it wishes to play in the ME in the near future, it maintains a robust military presence there to protect its interests in the waters of the Horn of Africa and to counter the growing influence of China, a rising power, and Russia, a revisionist power. Even though it is not directly involved in the Yemeni conflict, it has provided various types of support to the Sunni coalition.

China has been attempting to implement its ambitious BRI project in a strategic region, in order to ensure the security of the critical sea routes it depends on to receive its energy imports and deliver its exports to their destinations, and particularly to Europe. China has maintained its traditional posture of non-interference in matters in which it has no direct interest. Therefore, it has not intervened in the Yemeni conflict, and has no plans to do so unless it poses a threat to the implementation of the BRI.

Russia has relied on its soft power to return to a region it considers strategic and where it once had a presence as the Soviet Union. It has remained neutral in the Yemen conflict and has attempted to open a conversation with all actors and build bridges that will enable it to build military bases in the waters of the Gulf of Aden. It has also attempted to occupy the

spaces that the US has abandoned by strengthening relations with Washington's traditional allies in the region, including with Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

As for the regional powers, their interests are varied and conflicting. This study identified three separate blocks. The Sunni bloc is led by Saudi Arabia. The country has attempted to isolate Iran and prevent it from gaining dominance over a vital region for international shipping, and especially for the energy trade. Iran leads the Shiite bloc and aims to control the Horn of Africa region with the support of its proxy forces, which extend from Lebanon to Yemen and are active in virtually the entire territory of Saudi Arabia. If it gains control over the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, it will be in a privileged position to become the dominant power in the Arabian Peninsula and surrounding waters. The third bloc consists of Turkey and Qatar. Both countries have common interests and defend the vision set in motion in the various "Arab springs", and both wish to extend their influence in the Horn of Africa by building military bases to gain the strategic depth they need to oppose the Sunni coalition. Israel's posture will depend on the actions of Iran and the Houthi militias, but also Hezbollah, in the near future. While it is not directly involved in the Yemen conflict, it supports the Arab coalition and has attempted to expand its regional influence through Israeli companies who hold economic monopolies in several nations of South East Africa.

This study has shown that the Horn of Africa and surrounding waters, which are vital international trade routes, is a theatre of geopolitical competition and power affirmation and projection by both global powers (USA, China and Russia) and regional powers (Saudi Arabia, Iran, UAE, Egypt, Israel, Qatar and Turkey), and that those disputes are escalating.

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