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Toward a Red Sea Forum: The Gulf, the Horn of Africa, & Architecture for a New Regional Order

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This publication draws on dozens of consultations with government officials and non-government actors from the Gulf and the Horn of Africa, as well as from a broader field of interested states and institutions. These include: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia (and Somaliland), Yemen, Ethiopia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, the European Union, Germany, Finland, Norway, the United States, the African Union, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, and the United Nations. Research and interviews were conducted primarily between April and July 2019.

Zach Vertin
Doha, November 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Red Sea has fast become the subject of new geopolitical intrigue, as unprecedented engagement between Gulf states and the Horn of Africa reframes politics, economics, and security astride one of the world's most heavily trafficked waterways.¹ Friends and foes have converged in this increasingly crowded neighborhood as the Red Sea and its environs are infused with greater strategic import. Opportunities and risks abound, and as in any emerging frontier, the rules of the game are yet to be written.

The flurry of new activity raises the prospect of political cooperation and economic integration across the emerging Red Sea arena. But as regional rivals vie for access and influence, a narrative of contest has so far prevailed. No clear hegemon exists, and the competition among aspirants is characterized by projections of influence across ever-greater swathes of land and sea. For those inside and outside the region, freedom of navigation is at stake, as is the protection of maritime trade and control of a major strategic chokepoint at the southern gate of the Red Sea—the Bab al Mandab. Geo-economics also inform these new dynamics, as do ideology, political transitions, and energy and infrastructure development. The war in Yemen has also shaped strategic calculations, as has confrontation between Iran and its adversaries in the adjacent sea lanes. Viewed with a wider lens, the nexus of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden also represents the western flank of an emerging theater of competition among global powers: the Indian Ocean.

Fortunately, governments on both shores are now debating a so-called “Red Sea forum”—a collective through which concerned states might come together to discuss shared interests, identify emergent threats, and fashion common solutions. Over the last year, a series of initiatives have been undertaken toward creation of such a governance arrangement, with varying approaches and varying degrees of success. Competing visions have precipitated both collaboration and tension, as regional states feel each other out, testing different ideas about the ideal design for a forum, its membership, and its objectives.

The littoral states of the Red Sea anchor the conversation, though critical neighboring countries are beginning to engage as well. Europe has expressed

interest in supporting such a forum, while China has established an economic and military presence at the mouth of the Red Sea. The United States, meanwhile, is seen as increasingly absent from the region, its decades-old regional security umbrella no longer assured. Perceptions of American withdrawal have opened new, albeit unstable, space, empowering some regional actors while leaving others confused.

This paper surveys the changing Red Sea context and then offers the rationale for a trans-regional governance framework. It sheds light on various initiatives undertaken to date, including the challenges confronted and the risks of co-option. It offers design elements for Red Sea architects to consider and identifies other multilateral fora that might serve as useful templates. Finally, it offers perspectives from littoral states, their immediate neighbors, and the wider group of interested global actors.

Underpinning this paper is a belief that Gulf and African states, as well as external partners, would benefit from the establishment of a Red Sea governance framework. At its best, these stakeholders could together confront issues such as trade and infrastructure development, maritime security, mixed migration, labor relations, environmental protection, and conflict management. At a minimum, such an architecture could raise the costs of destabilizing activity by any individual member state, while providing African countries with a platform to engage Gulf countries on a more equal—and less transactional—basis. In practice, a regular forum might also force broader and more robust engagement between Gulf and Horn governments, as knowledge of politics, society, and bureaucratic systems is weaker than the sentimental narratives of shared history sometimes suggest.

Littoral states and other interested stakeholders may soon have to render judgment on the nascent initiatives—including whether to participate in (or lend their support to) a proposed forum, how to maximize its value, and how to harmonize potentially competing initiatives. Absent clarity of purpose and sufficiently inclusive membership, each may fizzle out.

As states with different cultures, models of government, and styles of diplomacy attempt to shape a new multilateral collective, obstacles abound. But the potential dividends of integration, development, and conflict prevention merit the effort. A Red Sea forum will not deliver shared prosperity or cure all ills, but it can offer this diverse set of actors a venue to shape the emergent trans-regional order, maximizing opportunity and minimizing risk, in what might otherwise become a dangerously chaotic arena.

THE RED SEA REGION



INTRODUCTION: A NEW RED SEA CONTEXT

The history of the Gulf and Horn can be understood partly in dichotomy, contrasted by notions of the Red Sea as a feature of union—or division. The cultures, economies, and people of each sub-region have indeed been informed by generations of engagement astride this narrow waterway, for better and worse. Trade, migration, linguistic heritage, and religious affinity all feature, as do slavery, conflict, and religious mistrust. Projections of power and ideology—including Cold War jockeying—have animated relations, as have asymmetries arising from the rapid accumulation of Gulf wealth. At the same time, the import of this geographic proximity is sometimes overstated, yielding invocations of shared culture, kinship, and opportunity that sometimes outstrip historical realities or belie fundamental differences of state and society.²

New narratives are in the making, however. A confluence of political, economic, and security changes has given rise to a new—albeit highly fluid—dispensation in the Red Sea. As old geography and old assumptions are rendered obsolete, the evolving trans-regional context is shaped by increasing interdependence across three tiers.

Tier 1 Political Transition in the Horn: Sparked in 2018 by popular demands for reform, the Horn of Africa is undergoing a period of profound political change.³ The ouster of decades-old regimes in the region’s two largest states—first Ethiopia, then Sudan—raises the prospect of a potentially historic transformation across the greater Horn. While catalyzed by domestic forces, Gulf states have since influenced each country’s transition in both positive and negative directions. The promise of political renewal is matched only by an equal measure of fragility, and while the outcomes are far from the certain, these events have already shaped, and will continue to shape, developments in neighboring Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia, and the breakaway region of Somaliland.

Tier 2 New Gulf Engagement (and Rivalry): Since 2014, economic and strategic calculations have driven previously unseen levels of Gulf state activity in the Horn of Africa. The most tangible manifestation of this new interest has been a mad dash for real estate on the African coast, where the acquisition of commercial ports and military outposts has drawn considerable foreign attention.⁴

Gulf engagement in the Horn of Africa was initially born of concerns about potential Iranian influence, including the prospect of Tehran gaining a foothold in the Red Sea.⁵ But the push reflected a broader move by Abu Dhabi and Riyadh to project greater power across the Middle East and its environs. The two states were going on offense, asserting themselves at a time when traditional powers (Egypt, Syria, Iraq) were weakened and U.S. security guarantees seemed increasingly uncertain.⁶

The Saudi and Emirati Sheikhs doubled down in 2015 with the onset of war in Yemen, seeking military perches on the African coast as they sought to expand land and sea operations in the surrounding theater. Despite U.N. mediation efforts and a nominal ceasefire deal for the Red Sea port of Hodeidah in December 2018, the war in Yemen continues—its humanitarian and displacement crisis putting more pressure on the region.⁷ As Yemeni factions, Iranian-backed Houthis, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Gulf-sponsored Sudanese forces fight for control of territory and coastline, and broader tension with Iran manifests in the adjacent waterways, these heavily-trafficked sea environs remain decidedly unstable.

Most recently, and most consequentially, the push for access and influence in the Horn intensified in 2017 as a result of the Gulf crisis, as the heated row, pitting Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt against Qatar and Turkey, was exported to the Horn. Animated by personal, political, commercial, and ideological currents, the rivalry polarized the Red Sea and destabilized parts of the Horn, an already volatile neighborhood struggling to overcome its own long-standing fissures. In the two years since, Gulf engagement has catalyzed important investments and some notably positive political events—offering a glimpse of what greater integration could bring.⁸ But it has also been marked by heavy-handed attempts to engineer friendly regimes, undercut rivals, or secure commercial interests—in Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Sudan.

Tier 3 Great Power Competition? The prospect of great power competition has added a third dimension to the chess match in the Red Sea, and the stakes are high. Each year hundreds of billions of dollars of international trade flows through the Red Sea's southern gate, between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Freedom of navigation from the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal and Red Sea to the Indian and Pacific Oceans likewise depends on this 20-mile wide bottleneck. Djibouti, the tiny city-state at the fulcrum of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, has long been home to the region's only deep-water port and to American, French, and Japanese military facilities. Attention spiked when China joined the club in 2017, opening its first-ever overseas

base just six miles from the American base, while India, Saudi Arabia, and Russia have also signaled interest in establishing a regional presence.⁹

As China bolsters its overseas presence and its trade volume, and the Indo-Pacific emerges as a theater for competition, so too have the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea garnered interest from new constituencies. In response to China's arrival, additional U.S. government resources were allocated to the Djibouti base and to diversifying America's military posture in the region. While over-stating the threat, members of Congress expressed alarm in 2018 over the potential national security implications arising from China's new leverage in Djibouti.¹⁰ Soon thereafter, then National Security Adviser John Bolton highlighted the Trump Administration's focus on great power competition when unveiling a new Africa strategy, likewise zeroing in on Beijing's reach in Djibouti, the Horn, and Red Sea trade routes. Citing concerns about potential debt traps, port acquisitions, and nefarious military behavior, observers took note that Bolton's speech on U.S. policy in Africa made 14 references to China.¹¹

Meanwhile, Gulf states are variously cooperating and competing with Chinese commercial interests as they look to shape their own geo-economic relationships with Beijing. For example, the UAE's global logistics and shipping industry sees Chinese trade volume to Africa and Europe growing and so, through state and commercial means, has aimed to integrate itself into the Belt and Road phenomenon before finding itself wholly supplanted. As the commercial and military footprint of external actors continues to expand, and global powers commit more and more resources to the Western Indian Ocean and the broader Indo-Pacific, Horn and Red Sea states may find themselves increasingly subject to the "extra-regional pressures" and competition associated with a larger—and shifting—global security context.¹²

THE IDEA: A RED SEA FORUM

Forward-thinking policymakers surmised that a new multilateral framework was needed to manage the proliferation of activity across these three tiers. A so-called “Red Sea Forum” thus became a topic of considerable discussion in 2018–19, both inside and outside the region. Establishment of such a venue, where concerned states might come together to discuss shared interests, identify emergent threats, and fashion common solutions, is a sensible response to new realities.

Under the banner of a Red Sea collective, African and Gulf states could together confront issues as diverse as trade and infrastructure development, maritime security, mixed migration, labor relations and financial flows, environmental protection, and conflict management. The less-developed African states—some of which have struggled to harness new interest and influence from cash-rich Gulf counterparts—might also benefit from a multilateral platform where they can articulate shared goals and interests while mitigating the pressures associated with financial patronage.

Three specific examples help to illustrate the potential benefits of a forum. First, should a security event transpire in the Red Sea region—whether ignited by the war in Yemen, regional rivalries, spillover of political tumult, piracy, or terrorism—a forum could conceivably convene to manage the problem, pre-empt further escalation, and coordinate a response. No such talk shop currently exists and, without one, the risk of unintended conflict remains unnecessarily high.

Second, the prospect of more commercial seaports on the African coast—a region long served almost exclusively by a lone port in Djibouti—means opening huge new markets to trade. But the development of new and externally financed infrastructure—from ports to pipelines and rail and roads—has also proven contentious and, in some cases, destabilizing.¹³ The resources and geography of the Horn mean any large-scale infrastructure development will necessarily have regional impacts. Competition will be inevitable, as each country will look to maximize its own interests, but a

Red Sea forum could be a place where state and commercial actors negotiate energy and infrastructure plans that maximize efficiency and shield weaker actors from being exploited.

Third, tens of thousands of irregular migrants leave the Horn of Africa each year en route to the Gulf, often by way of Yemen, where they hope to find employment.¹⁵ Some 300,000 conflict-displaced Yemenis, meanwhile, have fled in the opposite direction—crossing the Red Sea and ending up across the Horn of Africa.¹⁵ States on both shores would benefit from a common conversation about migration flows, especially in the event of a post-war transition in Yemen.¹⁶

DESIGN AND PARTICIPATION

Every coastal nation in the region lays claim to the intellectual genesis of Red Sea cooperation. The Eritreans cite a vision advanced by their president in 2008, the Egyptians and Yemenis point to respective efforts dating back to the 1970s. The Saudis peddle a fact sheet outlining half a dozen initiatives between 1956 and the present.¹⁷ While none of these came to fruition, a changing geopolitical context prompted renewed efforts toward multilateral governance in 2017.

Despite broad interest in the concept, its ideal design and character have been the subject of varying degrees of disagreement, mistrust, and uncertainty. As a diverse and sometimes competing group of states attempt to forge a new multilateral framework, such challenges are to be anticipated.

Membership in a forum has, not surprisingly, been the most contentious issue to date. Who should be party to a Red Sea organization, who not, and on what basis? Some have sought to limit participation to littoral states only, others to devise more inclusive membership criteria. Such debates have also been colored by existing geopolitical rivalries—from the Gulf Arab crisis to the Nile waters feud between Egypt and Ethiopia.¹⁸

Egypt has been most outspoken on the question of membership; its diplomats recycle a consistent talking point on what Cairo believes should be the sole selection criteria: Red Sea coastline.¹⁹ An organization of states should be comprised of—and limited to—states “on” the Red Sea, they argue. There is a clear and defensible logic to this position, though it is also a means to exclude Ethiopia and other actors that might diminish Cairo’s influence.

There are equally cogent arguments, however, for including additional states from the immediate “neighborhood”—such as Ethiopia and Oman. The fact that Ethiopia does not technically have any Red Sea coastline (it lies just 30 miles from the nearest shore) is not a particularly convincing rationale to exclude one of the region’s most important heavyweights; the country of 100 million is the lynchpin of politics, economics, security, and infrastructure development across the Horn.²⁰ Others with interests and relationships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden could also be involved in some fashion, including other Gulf countries, Western powers, and China.

The membership riddle can, and should, be solved in part by tailoring the format. One proposal worthy of consideration is a system of concentric circles, in which littoral states would form the nucleus of an organization but would invite a second, and possibly third, circle of states to participate—both “neighbors” of undeniable size and consequence, and actors from outside the region that have vested Red Sea interests and can bring technical and financial resources to bear. These states could be welcomed as partners, observers, or invited stakeholders on a case-by-case basis.

A forum cannot, and should not, include everyone, lest it succumb to the lowest common denominator generalities that have sunk many a multilateral talk shop.²¹ But neither should its core members deny the global profile of commercial and strategic interests in the region nor turn away the partnerships and capital investments that European, American, and Asian actors could bring to the table. These foreign governments are already present in and around the Bab al Mandab, a point European advocates have stressed when encouraging a flexible format. “We are all already there,” opined one. “There’s no sense attempting to fly under the radar.” Despite initial reluctance, the idea of multi-tiered membership gained traction in mid-2019, as Cairo and other Red Sea capitals calculated that it was better to take the lead in shaping such a format than to deny these realities.

Design considerations should also reflect clear objectives. Here too, states have differing views, though those differences can be harder to discern. Further deliberations may help to better define the scope and aims of a Red Sea forum and get states invested in making it work for them.. In the interim, Red Sea architects should first ensure that the forum is not monopolized by larger or wealthier actors or used either to advance narrow strategic agendas or legitimize wider hegemonic goals. Such co-option would compromise the integrity and utility of a forum, positioning it as a partisan instrument to those on the outside while disincentivizing member states from investing in its success.

Second, the architects should design a flexible format—more venue than organization. Every country need not convene on every issue; some matters may be tackled by a subset of states, others will benefit from broad participation. While Red Sea states and their neighbors do need a venue through which their diplomats can regularly engage on emergent risks and opportunities, they do not need another unwieldy or overly formal bureaucracy to undertake this work on their behalf. Lastly, while matters of peace and security have figured prominently in discussions to date, allowing them to become the sole focus could reinforce zero-sum thinking among regional states while overshadowing legitimate opportunities for collective gain on a wider menu of issues.

MODELS TO DRAW ON

The Red Sea arena is unique in its geography and composition, but its constituent governments would nonetheless be wise to adapt lessons from other multilateral fora managing complex issues. Several models have been recommended for comparative analysis, including those with prominent maritime agendas, though each deserves more in-depth research and invitations for formal exchange.

European diplomats have suggested the Council of Baltic Sea States as a baseline model for consideration. Established in 1992 amid tectonic geopolitical change, the 11-member collective has since met in a variety of formats to tackle political, economic, environmental, and other concerns. The Baltic Sea Council is administered by a rotating presidency and a small secretariat in Stockholm, while 11 additional nations are invited to participate as observers.²²

European Union (EU) officials considered sharing lessons from Baltic cooperation as early as 2016.²³ Finland and Sweden, each of which has signaled interest in supporting Red Sea governance, followed in 2019 by producing a modest resource paper on Baltic cooperation. It underscored the “flexible [and] demand-driven” nature of Baltic cooperation, the diversity of member state engagement across multiple levels of government and society, and the organization’s embrace of “various forms of participation for non-littoral states.”²⁴ Helsinki then co-sponsored a Baltic Sea study tour for non-governmental actors from the region in August 2019.²⁵

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional collective comprising 10 member states, 100,000 miles of coastline, and 600 million people, may also merit consideration.²⁶ The ASEAN region spans four major religions, an array of political and economic systems, and another of the world’s most heavily trafficked shipping corridors—the Malacca strait. Created in 1967, ASEAN’s founders faced vulnerability to Cold War geopolitics and so set out to strengthen their collective standing through security, economic, social, and technical cooperation.²⁷

Today, ASEAN convenes rotating member state summits and invites ministers from the United States, China, India, Russia, the EU, and others to an annual

dialogue on regional affairs and the Asia-Pacific more broadly. Hundreds of smaller confabs also take place under the ASEAN banner—from trade to public health to environmental conservation—which, in turn, supporters argue, have fostered informal networks across the sub-region.²⁸

ASEAN has, by many accounts, proven an important vehicle for economic development, conflict mitigation, and regional security—including as a buffer against encroachment by outside powers. But it is far from perfect. Some critics lament the organization's policies of mutual non-interference and consensus-based decision making.²⁹ Others identify the more recent challenge to the organization presented by member state vulnerability to China.³⁰ Great power competition in the South China Sea has shaped individual and collective security calculations among ASEAN members, a complex challenge that may soon confront states in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. This rich and varied record may make ASEAN a particularly pertinent comparative study.

While Red Sea states differ from those of ASEAN and the Baltic Sea Council—in their demographics, styles of governance, and economic profiles—these and other multilateral fora offer Red Sea architects ample material to consider and adapt.

TOWARD A FORUM: EFFORTS TO DATE

A series of Red Sea initiatives have been undertaken by governments and international institutions over the past 12 months, with varying approaches and varied results. These include efforts led by: (1) the EU and Germany, (2) the African Union (AU) and its sub-regional partner, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and (3) the Saudi and Egyptian governments.³¹ This latter initiative has convened regional diplomats on four occasions and, despite legitimate reservations over the format and objectives, has made the most tangible progress toward a standing Red Sea organization.

Each effort has helped to develop notions of shared governance astride a changing Red Sea landscape, and each has encountered formidable political obstacles. Fits and starts are to be expected as a diverse group of states attempt to shape a new multilateral framework. Its champions are right to learn from these early gatherings, refine their approach, and continue laying the groundwork for a flexible and inclusive Red Sea architecture.

INTERESTED FRIENDS: THE EUROPEAN UNION & GERMANY—FALL 2018

The EU's special envoy for the Horn of Africa, Alex Rondos, was an early study of trans-regional engagement and, thus, an early advocate of structured Red Sea dialogue. He also identified the potential implications for Europe.³² Following his brief to the Council of the European Union in October 2015, the Council issued conclusions identifying “broader supra-regional dynamics.” Events in the Horn were “visibly intertwined with those of the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt,” they assessed, “whereby the politics of the region are influenced by, and in turn affect” the wider Red Sea region. The 2015 gathering was also among the first to identify the gap, noting the absence of any “regional forum tasked with promoting cooperation on maritime security and other matters for the Red Sea.”³³

Though little happened in the intervening years, by the summer of 2018, Council conclusions reflected just how much had evolved, and how fast. EU members noted that the Red Sea had become pivotal “in geopolitical and strategic terms,” and that developments on both shores, including the growing “militarization

of the Red Sea coast,” had put both regional stability and European interests in jeopardy.³⁴ By that time advocating for “an organized and inclusive regional forum,” the Council resolved to intensify its engagement with Red Sea states.³⁵

The EU Envoy teamed up with Germany to invite Red Sea states and other concerned nations to a gathering in September 2018 on the margins of the U.N. General Assembly. Berlin had asserted special interest in the file and considered making it a priority during its forthcoming two-year term on the U.N Security Council.³⁶ Conscious of political sensitivities and the need for careful, iterative diplomacy, the aim of the New York meeting was modest: “a brainstorming session” among concerned states.³⁷ While conveners saw themselves as “midwives,” they emphasized that the establishment of a Red Sea forum was a decision to be taken by the states of the region.

Though EU and German counterparts had full-throated support from Europe, the event did not go as hoped. The seats of several key states—including Egypt, Eritrea, Sudan, and Djibouti—remained empty, while a representative from the Arab League, perceived as “speaking on behalf” of Egypt and other members, expressed clear reservations. The meeting reflected core questions at the heart of the wider debate: who should convene a Red Sea forum, who should be at the table, and—most notably—whether the Europeans, or the West more broadly, should be involved at all. The initiative did help to focus states on the task at hand, however, and to catalyze a series of follow-on efforts by regional states and institutions.

AFRICAN INITIATIVE: AFRICAN UNION AND IGAD MANDATES—2018–19

African states and multilateral organizations also began engaging on Red Sea matters in 2017. After mandating the AU High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP)—a small mediation led by former South African President Thabo Mbeki—to devise a comprehensive plan for peace and development in the Horn of Africa,³⁸ AU officials identified Gulf actors and Red Sea geopolitics as an inevitable pillar of any forward-looking strategy. Conscious of the dynamics that “straddl[e] the Red Sea and Indian Ocean,” and have made the Horn a new “center of international interest,”³⁹ the AU’s Peace and Security Council then affirmed the Panel’s outreach to Arab peninsula states in formulating its strategy for the Horn.⁴⁰

If the AU is to play a leading role in shaping Red Sea governance, its strategy must account for institutional obstacles. The AU represents only one shore of the Red Sea and will struggle to demonstrate its relevance or secure Gulf partnership absent a united membership. Two key member states—each with existing ties to

Saudi Arabia and the UAE—may prove particularly tricky to corral. Egypt, which currently holds the rotating AU chairmanship, has signaled its preference for Red Sea matters to be dealt with exclusively by Red Sea states. Eritrea, meanwhile, has long preferred a unilateral foreign policy over AU (or IGAD) cooperation, and has so far acted true to form.⁴¹

A viable AU strategy may thus depend on harnessing Egypt's position as a bridge between the Arab and African spheres. To this end, Mbeki visited Cairo in May 2019 to discuss Red Sea cooperation. During his bilateral meeting with Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, the latter laid plain his concern that the AU and EU had been cooperating to politicize the Red Sea issue. Mbeki dismissed the notion while outlining Africa's collective interests in Red Sea governance and the case for an AU role in articulating those interests. According to AU officials, Mbeki also argued that a "littoral states only" format would be insufficient, given a wider set of legitimate African stakeholders.⁴²

The question of Red Sea governance lays bare a particularly complex relationship between Egypt and its Gulf patrons (further detailed on page 17). While the interests of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE often overlap, key divergences have been overlooked and the relationship is not as synergistic as is sometimes assumed. El-Sissi, like many other Egyptian officials, has privately expressed resentment over being lumped together with his financial backers, and seeks to distinguish Egypt, its policies, and its policymaking as independent.⁴³ In this, Cairo's diplomats sometimes underscore Egypt as African, especially with African audiences, and their desire to be more involved on "African" issues.

Proponents believe that harnessing Egypt's African credentials and its desire to assert greater independence may be the best chance for the AU to act as a counterweight to wealthier and more powerful Gulf states. This will not be easy. Mbeki and el-Sissi agreed to work together, and both sides express satisfaction with the meeting. But Cairo still sees dealing with the AU as a "second step," after littoral states organize, and skeptics remain doubtful that Egypt will cede ground on an initiative it still sees as its own.

Mbeki and his team subsequently held consultations with leaders in Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, and Djibouti in July and August 2019 and intend to visit Sudan, South Sudan, and Ethiopia before issuing recommendations by the end of the year.⁴⁴ Despite initial plans to visit capitals on both sides of the Red Sea, whether and how Mbeki plans to engage Saudi or other Gulf monarchs remains unclear. Should Riyadh and its partners formalize their own Red Sea organization in the interim, AU conclusions may be diminished, and any attempt to represent collective African interests will have to account for new realities.

Complaints have also circulated that the AU has been slow to mobilize, particularly in engaging directly with the Gulf.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, AU and regional officials report that “ownership” of the Red Sea file has been the subject of bureaucratic infighting between the AUHIP and the Secretariat of the AU’s Peace and Security Commission.⁴⁶

IGAD, East Africa’s pre-eminent regional organization, also took up the issue in February 2019, acknowledging new “threats, risks, and challenges” in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Identifying its importance for both “littoral *and* non-littoral IGAD member states,” it likewise resolved to develop a common position to protect strategic interests, including by establishing a taskforce, appointing Kenyan Mohammed Guyo as special envoy, and committing to close coordination with the AU.⁴⁷ Its envoy has traveled widely since (sometimes in tandem with his AU and U.N. counterparts), and the first meeting of the IGAD taskforce was convened in September 2019.⁴⁸

Recognition and mobilization by Africa’s continental and regional organizations is important, and ideally could serve to balance the moves of powerful players in the Gulf and Egypt. How all these pieces fit together, though, remains an open question. As IGAD seeks to assert its own role in shaping a governance framework, it too will confront institutional limitations, including funding constraints, capacity deficits, and political obstacles.

Of its seven active members, only Djibouti, Somalia, and Sudan have coastline on the Red Sea or Gulf of Aden. (Because these three are both IGAD members and invited participants in the Riyadh-based forum detailed below, each could face a particularly uncomfortable position if forced to choose between fora.) Kenya and land-locked Ethiopia, Uganda, and South Sudan have legitimate reasons to be at the table, but these claims are met with skepticism by key littoral states that prefer a more selective format. While Ethiopia has historically been a driving force behind IGAD, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s government has so far demonstrated less interest in utilizing the regional body as an instrument of its foreign policy.⁴⁹

Long-ostracized Eritrea, given its unique position and relationships, could theoretically act as an important liaison between Gulf states, the AU, and IGAD. But given President Isaias Afwerki’s aversion to multilateralism, his historically tempestuous relationship with IGAD and its Ethiopian chair (Asmara has twice suspended its membership, and remains inactive today), and his direct line to new backers in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, Eritrea has so far ignored AU and IGAD overtures on Red Sea matters.⁵⁰

Lastly, while Egyptian views on AU efforts may be ambiguous, news of the IGAD initiative was received with open contempt in Cairo—where diplomats had been working on their own initiative for more than a year. Egypt is not a member of IGAD and has long viewed the organization as a vehicle for Ethiopian interests. “Any attempt to put Ethiopia at the center of the Red Sea conversation... any involvement of IGAD in the Red Sea” one diplomat explained, “is totally *unacceptable*...a non-starter.”⁵¹ Born of regional rivalry and sustained acrimony over Nile water negotiations, Egyptian officials are both unrestrained in their criticism of Addis Ababa and resentful of what they perceive to be outsize Western support for Ethiopia. In this context, Cairo also believes the EU was “behind” the IGAD effort and sees foreign support to African organizations as attempts “to antagonize or compete with them on the Red Sea.”⁵²

NEW POWER DYNAMICS: SAUDI ARABIA & EGYPT: DECEMBER 2017–PRESENT

A joint initiative by Saudi Arabia and Egypt has outpaced European and African efforts to date, and currently represents the most sustained effort toward a Red Sea forum. Despite some notable flaws, four meetings and comparatively high-level participation have lent the effort an increasing degree of recognition and, as such, this section reviews the joint endeavor in greater detail. The initiative was first championed by Cairo, and tension emerged after Riyadh asserted control in 2018 and advanced a different vision. Though competing ideas over structure and objectives have slowed the effort, the Saudis are intent on finalizing the forum in 2019.

Egypt, by virtue of its geography, is a natural bridge between the African and Arab spheres, and home to both the Suez Canal and some 900 miles of Red Sea coast. On this basis, it sought to assert a leading role in the design and management of a Red Sea forum in 2017. Egyptian diplomats outline a thoughtful range of issues for potential cooperation among littoral states, and the country’s Red Sea interests are as legitimate and broad as any in the region. But Cairo’s assertiveness has also been a means of playing defense—against states or institutions in the region, and further afield, whose alternative notions for Red Sea cooperation might challenge its position or impinge on its objectives.

To this end, Egyptian diplomats often recite a familiar talking point: member states in any forum must be littoral states—*on* the Red Sea. In other words, actors near the body of water, or which claim interests there, need not have a seat at the table. “When we say ‘Red Sea,’ we mean ‘Red Sea,’” one Egyptian diplomat explained, “We don’t mean Kenya and Uganda or the UAE and Kuwait.”⁵³

Despite strong views, Egypt—still weakened by eight years of domestic tumult and constrained in its ability to project influence abroad—has found itself in an uneasy partnership with its neighbor and financial benefactor, Saudi Arabia. Negotiations over Red Sea governance have reflected wider power dynamics between President el-Sissi and his counterparts in Riyadh (and Abu Dhabi), who first propped up the Egyptian administration with huge financial injections in 2013. Gulf aid and investment continued to flow in subsequent years, with some estimates suggesting as much as \$40 billion in total pledges.⁵⁴ While not wholly determinant in Egyptian policymaking, diplomats acknowledge that their posture has thus been shaped—and constrained—by Saudi patronage.⁵⁵

Some in Egypt's political class lament the foreign policy deference to Riyadh, citing their government's superior experience, knowledge of the region, and bureaucratic depth. "Every time we have a proposal, we're too self-conscious about how it will be received by the Saudis," one seasoned Egyptian politician opined, citing the Red Sea initiative. "We have only ourselves to blame."⁵⁶

Saudi Arabia's initial interest in the Horn of Africa was motivated by concerns about potential Iranian influence on its western flank. Saudi officials report that they had "too long neglected" bilateral relationships on the Red Sea's western shores, and so began investing political, financial, and diplomatic resources in recent years, eventually creating the position of minister of state for African affairs in 2018.⁵⁷ By the end of that year, Riyadh wrested control of the emerging Red Sea initiative from Egypt, and by April 2019, it had translated early efforts into concrete designs for a "Red Sea Council" (formally "The Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden").

Skeptics note that Riyadh's assertion of control has been accompanied by an undue emphasis on security. They worry its proposed Council is not aimed at multi-dimensional cooperation but is instead an attempt to create a kind of anti-Iranian military alliance. Others worry that the court of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is motivated not by genuine multilateralism but by prestige and aspirations of regional hegemony. "It's a desire to control the space," one Western diplomat concluded, "not to talk."⁵⁸

Both may be true. If the flurry of Saudi summitry in 2019 is any indication, Riyadh may indeed see the Red Sea organization as another platform from which to institutionalize its expanding patronage network, cultivate international legitimacy, and "rally Arab and Muslim opposition to Iran."⁵⁹

If and when Saudi Arabia moves to finalize its proposed Red Sea Council,⁶⁰ both littoral states and foreign stakeholders will have to decide whether it represents

the kind of multilateral forum they envisioned, whether it can be shaped to that end, or whether they should pursue an alternative. To ensure clear objectives, regional and international stakeholders should engage both Riyadh and Cairo now—affirming a leading role for littoral states while also making clear what kind of forum they could (and could not) get behind.

Egyptian officials maintain that the genesis for the joint initiative was a December 2017 meeting convened in Cairo, after which a communiqué was issued outlining several dozen areas for cooperation, from conflict resolution and renewable energy to transportation infrastructure and pollution control.⁶¹ These officials say they began with a deliberate focus on “thematic issues” and “confidence-building activities.” Starting slow, they surmised, would demonstrate the potential benefits of Red Sea cooperation and build consensus among the littoral states. Though the December 2017 communiqué also called for a permanent mechanism to regulate Red Sea cooperation, they did not want to focus on organizational structure, or on security matters, conscious that both could force members into zero-sum postures and run contrary to their goal of building a “common understanding.”⁶²

A follow-on meeting was envisioned in Egypt, but by the time the next meeting materialized twelve months later, in December 2018, officials in Riyadh had asserted greater interest, and ownership, of the initiative. This second and more visible gathering took place in Riyadh under the banner of the “Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.” Foreign ministers and senior diplomats from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, and Jordan participated, though the meeting highlighted competing visions for Red Sea governance and lacked the diplomatic advance work necessary to deliver the desired outcomes.

The Saudis appeared to be more focused on establishing an organization, and on matters of security, than their counterparts. Egyptian officials chafed at the Saudis’ disregard for their preferred step-by-step strategy and their desire to lead the initiative from Cairo. But they were particularly upset by Riyadh’s singular focus on structure and its “rush” to establish a body.⁶³ “For the Saudis, it’s form over content,” one frustrated Egyptian diplomat complained, “But what is the vision? Where do they want to go with this?”⁶⁴

For proponents of an inclusive forum, the Riyadh ministerial also lacked some key players. Ethiopia was not invited—a demand from Egypt, whose attempts to exclude it are not necessarily born of Ethiopia’s littoral deficit, but of bitter

competition between the two heavyweights.⁶⁵ Eritrea meanwhile declined to participate, its motivations not evident.⁶⁶ Subsequent meetings built upon the rocky start, including two sub-ministerial working sessions in Cairo in February and March 2019.⁶⁷ But important differences remained to be hashed out over structure, financing, procedures, and objectives, matters that ultimately prompted a “confrontation” at the fourth and most recent meeting in April 2019. When senior officials again convened in Riyadh, Egyptian diplomats were stunned to receive a draft charter for the proposed “Red Sea Council.” The Saudi document outlined a Riyadh-based assembly of three tiers: (1) a “Supreme Council” of kings and heads of state convened once a year to set strategy, (2) a ministerial council to develop and implement policy through bi-annual gatherings, and (3) a secretariat headed by a rotating secretary-general to drive the organization’s day-to-day operations.⁶⁸

Egyptian diplomats complain that the Saudis disregarded early notions of a flexible, light-footprint mechanism and are instead replicating a familiar, albeit unproductive, organizing structure. “We don’t want another Gulf Cooperation Council,” one explained of the proposal, “We don’t need another big, bloated organization.” Frustrated but deferring to their Saudi patrons, Egyptian representatives responded with 17 proposed amendments to the draft charter.

One amendment revisited Cairo’s initial idea on structure—a series of “commissions” to be based in multiple locations: a political body in Riyadh, a military body in Cairo, and economic and cultural commissions in other Red Sea capitals. While Egyptian representatives argue that such an arrangement could maximize national ownership among member states, Saudi officials have dismissed the notion as impractical.⁶⁹

Differences over decision-making models also persist. Egypt proposed a consensus model, which Riyadh also dismissed, arguing it would dilute the work of the body. The Saudis interpreted the preference for consensus voting as Cairo’s veto against any proposal welcoming Ethiopian membership. They believe Egypt is hoping to use a Red Sea organization as a bargaining chip with Addis Ababa, and do not want continuing tension between the two states—over Nile waters or the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam—to undermine the Red Sea initiative.⁷⁰

Objectives also remain to be refined. While trade promotion and environmental protection are included in the Saudi charter, the document is heavily focused on security—including a call for members to collectively confront “any challenges related to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, or any of the straits connected to them.”⁷¹ “The more cooperation and coordination that you have among the countries of this region,” Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir explained

following the meeting, “the less negative outside influence will be on this region.” Two weeks later, Saudi defense officials organized joint military exercises; the so-called “Red Wave 1” naval drills included personnel and assets from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Yemen, Jordan, and Somalia.⁷² Critics point to such activity, and to Riyadh’s characterizations of a “new regional security entity,”⁷³ as evidence that Red Sea multilateralism is being co-opted as an instrument of Saudi security policy.

Both Egyptian and Eritrean officials are adamant that they will not allow a forum to be used as a proxy for Saudi rivalry, whether with Iran, Turkey, or Qatar.⁷⁴ “The Saudis have become very narrow in their foreign policy,” another Egyptian official complained, using every platform—“the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Gulf Cooperation Council”—to advance an anti-Iranian agenda. “Iran is a problem,” explained another. “But it can’t be the defining problem for the region, or for a Red Sea forum. You can’t succeed by defining yourself only in opposition to something.”⁷⁵

Though the summer 2019 uptick in tensions with Tehran can only have reinforced wider concerns about Iran, Saudi officials deny such a singular focus. While arguing they are interested in the protection of the Red Sea from any and all threats—“a noble objective that will benefit the entire international community”—they are nonetheless quick to detail perceived Iranian threats already present in the region—from weapons smuggling to Shia proselytization to espionage vessels in the Red Sea. “I’m certain Iran is out to create havoc,” one argued, and to “infiltrate the Horn.”⁷⁶

The draft charter for a Red Sea Council also articulates a particularly stringent policy on member state withdrawal, requiring both permission of the Supreme Council and a commitment that the exiting state desist from supporting alternative “coalitions or entities that do not agree” with the Council’s interests or objectives. As a result of these and other signals, proponents of a more multifaceted Red Sea forum—in the region and among Western governments—interpret the Saudi initiative as hegemonic.

Despite their concerns, Egyptian officials remain begrudgingly committed to trying to steer their Saudi partners toward a more substantive Red Sea framework. Cairo is not alone, as diplomats from other regional capitals express concerns over the depth and direction of the Saudi endeavor.⁷⁷ “You see, anytime Riyadh calls a meeting, everyone has no choice but to respond,” one lamented, noting Saudi Arabia’s heft and the inevitable draw of its financial aid. “But we want (a forum) to be real, to be genuine...not just a photo op.”⁷⁷

Riyadh sees little reason for delay, arguing that Egypt and the region's smaller players have the most to gain from Red Sea cooperation, including by gaining access to economic opportunities that would not otherwise be available to these smaller economies. But it is also not preoccupied with such concerns, comfortable that its resources and influence allow it to shape a Red Sea organization as it sees fit. Saudi officials have accommodated Cairo on several items but made clear that their patience has limits. When push comes to shove, Saudi diplomats say they are "confident that the Crown Prince can persuade President Sissi" to accept their terms. As such, they report their intent to finalize the proposed Red Sea Council before the end of 2019.⁷⁹

PERSPECTIVES: LITTORAL STATES, NEIGHBORHOOD STATES, & GLOBAL ACTORS

Building on the views from Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the following section offers context and perspectives from other littoral states, from countries in the “neighborhood,” and from other global stakeholders. It is not a comprehensive analysis of national interests or foreign policy calculations, but a snapshot of respective views on the development of Red Sea governance arrangements.⁸⁰

PERSPECTIVES: OTHER LITTORAL STATES

Eritrea is as pivotal an actor as Egypt or Saudi Arabia, some argue, but its position on Red Sea cooperation remains a source of some confusion. Though invited to initial meetings in both Cairo and Riyadh, it chose not to attend. As an ally of Saudi Arabia, to which Eritrea owed a debt for helping alleviate its international isolation in 2018,⁸¹ the absence of an Eritrean delegation was conspicuous. It seemed that the country’s enigmatic president, Afwerki, was staying true to form by steering clear of multilateral entanglements. When asked about its absence, one Eritrean official affirmed that a deeply held skepticism of regional organizations was indeed “the starting point of Eritrean policy.” Detailing the underwhelming record of both the Arab League and IGAD, he added, “We do not want another regional grouping that does not have any impact.”⁸²

Eritrea then surprised observers in April 2019 by not only attending the second Riyadh meeting, but also issuing a rare public statement. Eritrean presidential adviser Yemane Gebreab addressed the meeting, and despite nominal support for the endeavor, he expressed Asmara’s doubts about the “proliferation of institutions” in the region and across the globe. He argued that though these efforts were often “launched to advance lofty objectives,” few ultimately “deliver the desired results.” The same had been true to date regarding a framework for the Red Sea, he said, before identifying 12 parameters—mostly process concerns—for potential member states to consider before establishing a body. When coupled with an appeal for “a patient and methodical approach” and the necessity of “Continuous... consultations,” it appeared Asmara was not inclined to rush toward a forum but preferred a take-it-slow approach.⁸³

Saudi officials persuaded the Eritrean president to participate in the April gathering, and pleaded with him to drop his insistence on a smaller alliance of just three member states (Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt). Asked how Asmara's Saudi backers would respond to its lukewarm position, one Eritrean diplomat acknowledged it may cause some misunderstandings, but explained, "You see, we are a national movement. It is our lifelong mindset. So, we may strengthen relations with any partner, including the Saudis, but we will never be puppets."⁸⁴ While Eritreans assert that no Red Sea initiative will be able to go forward without them, Riyadh does not expect a veto when it comes time to finalize the organization.

Eritrea's posture is also shaped by its evolving relationship with Ethiopia.⁸⁵ Some interpreted Eritrea's initial absence as President Isaias holding out on behalf of uninvited Ethiopia, given the two nations' budding rapprochement. But as that process stalled in the weeks and months before the conference, skeptics suggested that Isaias' hopes for Ethiopia and the region were not panning out, and had thus yielded political pressure at home and abroad. "He has proven adept at managing both war and frozen conflict," one regional diplomat opined, "but he's not very good at managing the peace."⁸⁶ Others agreed, explaining that Isaias could not be relied upon, the unpredictable president now testing the waters to see what bilateral alliances might best serve his current circumstances.⁸⁷

Sudanese officials participated in Red Sea gatherings in 2018–19, though the April collapse of the country's 30-year-old regime means Khartoum has no verifiable official position on Red Sea cooperation. As the country's feuding military factions and political groups consolidate a new transitional government, the issue may receive new attention, as Sudan's Red Sea coastline—including a sizable port and oil export facilities—is an important asset. But an inevitably weak transitional government is unlikely to have considerable impact in shaping the Red Sea agenda. Sudan's now-defunct regime long managed to play external actors off one another in the service of its own short-term gains, including by balancing relations with both sides of the Gulf Arab crisis. But Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt made concerted efforts to influence the country's fragile transition in 2019, leaning on the scales in favor of powerful security actors. Should this influence campaign succeed, Khartoum's new government may well follow a Saudi-Egyptian lead on Red Sea governance.⁸⁸

Yemeni officials underscore the fact that their country is the geographical center of the Gulf-Horn axis and that its historical relations with Djibouti, Somalia, and Ethiopia make it the most natural bridge to the Red Sea's western shore. Yemenis have long traded with, and emigrated to, countries in the Horn, not

least Djibouti, where a substantial portion of the country's political elite are of partial Yemeni descent.⁸⁹ Yemeni representatives say that they were among the first to call for Red Sea cooperation, citing 1977 efforts by military ruler Ibrahim Al-Hamdi to stabilize a contested Red Sea region, including forging a security pact with Ethiopia to ensure the free flow of maritime trade.⁹⁰

Yemen is also the main transit country for refugees and economic migrants traveling in both directions. More than 300,000 Yemenis have fled to the Horn to escape civil strife,⁹¹ while a quarter of a million Africans have come from the Horn to seek asylum in Yemen or to transit the country in search of work in wealthier Gulf states.⁹²

Though Yemen's vice foreign minister has participated in several of the Saudi-Egyptian consultations, as well as other Red Sea initiatives, Yemen—and Yemeni perspectives—have figured far too little in discussions on shared governance. On account of its civil war, a struggle for authority, and politicians backed by external factions, Yemen's true national interests can be difficult to ascertain. But some express frustration that foreign governments too often see Yemen “through the eyes” of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and only through a lens of security threats.⁹³

While Somalia has participated in each of the initiatives convened to date (EU, IGAD, AU, and Saudi-Egyptian), the government of President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed (“Farmajo”) appears to be taking a wait-and-see approach.⁹⁴ “We are members of the Red Sea Council,” one senior Somali diplomat noted, “but we will await (the Saudi) vision and their plan.” He explained that while Somalia, like others in the region, had no choice but to accept an invitation from a powerful benefactor like Riyadh, there were reservations in Mogadishu. “This could be a pressure group,” he said, characterizing internal discussions, “could be used for overcoming Iran, or for fighting in Yemen...could even be for blocking Qatar by water.” The Farmajo administration wants to avoid getting further entangled in regional rivalries, having already been destabilized by the Gulf feud in 2017.⁹⁵ Nonetheless, Mogadishu believes it better to be part of the emerging Saudi-led framework—privy to information and in position to raise concerns—than on the outside looking in.⁹⁶ Meanwhile, the country's semi-autonomous region of Somaliland—home to 400 miles of coastline on the Gulf of Aden—has figured prominently in the changing geopolitics of the Red Sea. Given its long-expressed desire for independence from Somalia, it has not surprisingly sought formal observer status in the IGAD task force on the Red Sea.⁹⁷

Djibouti has likewise participated in various Red Sea discussions to date. As host to both the busiest port on Africa's east coast and to five foreign militaries, the nation's economy depends almost exclusively on stability in its maritime

environs. The tiny state, which sits at the nexus of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, has been impacted as much as any by new trans-regional dynamics, by changes in neighboring Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Yemen, and by Gulf rivalries and great power competition on its soil. Djiboutian officials are eager to participate in a new Red Sea architecture but loath to find themselves caught between any more external powers.⁹⁸

Like Somalia and Sudan, Djibouti—as a member of the AU, IGAD, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the Arab League—may have to find a way to balance its participation in various Gulf and African initiatives. “We are a member of IGAD and of the Saudi initiative,” one senior foreign ministry official said of their allegiances on both shores, “and we must try somehow to bridge the gap between the two.” Djiboutian leaders place a premium on their “strategic relationship” with Saudi Arabia, however, and indicate they will sign up to whatever Red Sea mechanism is announced by Riyadh.⁹⁹

Regional diplomats report private Djiboutian misgivings about the Saudi initiative, and IGAD officials report strong cooperation from Djibouti, citing its offer to host a meeting of the IGAD taskforce in September 2019.¹⁰⁰ But Djibouti’s government also reports having “made very clear” to AU and IGAD partners that while other states can and should play complementary roles, “the littoral states, which are directly affected,” come first. “They must play the primary role and shoulder the responsibility first,” the same official explained.¹⁰¹

Though each has very limited Red Sea coastline, Israel and Jordan are likewise members of the Red Sea littoral, with access via ports at Eilat and Aqaba, respectively. Neither country has been directly involved in the Gulf Arab crisis or its recent reverberations in the Horn of Africa, and so both have figured less prominently in Red Sea debates over the last year. Israel maintains active diplomatic and security relations with Horn states, however, in part to challenge Iranian influence—an objective it shares with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. This was evidenced most recently by the August 2019 visit of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy to Israel, during which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pledged even greater security cooperation between the two nations.¹⁰² Despite Israel’s port, its quiet coordination with Saudi Arabia and the UAE on select regional security matters, and concern about Iranian maritime access in its neighborhood, Tel Aviv has been quiet on the matter of Red Sea governance to date—likely aware that its membership may be politically untenable and, at the same time, unconcerned by the objectives of such a grouping.¹⁰³ Jordan, meanwhile, has been a regular participant in the Saudi-Egyptian initiative and has also demonstrated its willingness

to host more informal Red Sea dialogues facilitated by non-governmental organizations from both Europe and the United States.¹⁰⁴

PERSPECTIVES: “NEIGHBORHOOD” STATES

Consumed with a sweeping political transition at home, an incomplete peace with Eritrea, and a diplomatic effort in neighboring Sudan, Ethiopia was comparatively quiet on Red Sea governance matters until early 2019. But diplomats in Addis report they are now paying very close attention to Red Sea governance initiatives and have invested new diplomatic capital in AU and IGAD efforts.¹⁰⁵ “Any effort to govern the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden that does not include us will not be fair or realistic,” one senior Ethiopian diplomat said of the Saudi-Egyptian initiative, from which Addis has so far been excluded. “The Red Sea is a natural outlet—a strategic outlet—for us.” As a landlocked country whose imports and exports depend on secure and open access to Djibouti and other Red Sea outlets, they maintain: “For us, there is no alternative.”¹⁰⁶

Ethiopian diplomats signal that while they are open to participating in the Saudi-Egypt effort, they are not willing to do so in a secondary capacity. “We need to be primary participants,” one said, emphasizing that the Europeans, Americans, and others supporting Red Sea governance initiatives all recognize Ethiopia’s centrality to regional developments. As the Egyptians and Saudis are unlikely to invite Ethiopia as an equal partner, Addis is likely to continue pursuing IGAD and AU as a counterweight. Many in Ethiopia’s political class feel more comfortable there given skepticism about the Gulf. “Arab countries, they have no culture of multilateralism,” one suggested. “They want only to deal bilaterally with states in the Horn.”¹⁰⁷

Ethiopia’s participation (or not) in a future Red Sea framework comes amid a burgeoning, albeit cautious, new relationship with the Gulf. While previous administrations in Addis Ababa harbored concerns about Gulf encirclement, particularly with regard to UAE projections of power after 2011, Abiy appears to have turned a new page.¹⁰⁸ Faced with dwindling foreign reserves, he secured \$3 billion worth of aid and investment pledges from Saudi Arabia and the UAE in 2018, two nations that also hosted ceremonies heralding his historic rapprochement with Eritrea. Conscious of domestic perceptions of foreign patronage, Abiy has tread carefully, resisting appeals to pick favorites in the Gulf Arab crisis and cultivating Saudi and Emirati allies while also visiting Qatar in April 2019.¹⁰⁹

Ethiopia’s exclusion from a Red Sea forum could complicate growing relations with the Gulf as well as the development of ports, infrastructure, and energy

resources across the Horn. Nile water politics and Ethiopia's still-tense relationship with Egypt are likewise relevant to ongoing negotiations. If not handled well by either side, Red Sea governance matters could exacerbate, rather than mitigate, friction between the two regional heavyweights.

The UAE has no direct claim to a seat at the Red Sea table, but as the most politically, militarily, and economically active regional player in recent years, Abu Dhabi's relative silence on Red Sea governance matters is surprising. Though they do not always see eye-to-eye, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have worked in close coordination on a range of regional foreign policy challenges—in Iran, Syria, Libya, Sudan, and Yemen, as well as over the ongoing feud with Qatar and Turkey. While many assume Abu Dhabi is quietly supporting the joint Saudi-Egyptian initiative, regional diplomats—including senior Saudi officials—report remarkably little interaction with Emirati officials on this front.

Officials in Turkey likewise acknowledge no claim on the Red Sea sphere but are skeptical of the aims of the Saudi-led initiative. Asked whether Riyadh's interest in driving a Red Sea forum was interpreted as a move to concretize a wider alliance against Iran, one senior official in Ankara responded rhetorically, “or an alliance against us?”¹¹⁰ Egypt and Saudi Arabia had expressed outrage over Turkish engagement in the Horn in recent years, most notably following President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's December 2017 deal with Sudan's then president, Omar al-Bashir, to revitalize the historic Red Sea port of Suakin.¹¹¹ While carrying some symbolic value, the strategic implications of proposed cooperation at Suakin were over-stated. Turkey has maintained a significant political and commercial presence in Somalia, but the April 2019 ouster of al-Bashir and the changing political context in Sudan have diminished Ankara's partnerships in the Red Sea region.¹¹²

Qatar, too, is a neighborhood state that has cultivated influence and relationships in the Horn in recent years. Its posture in the region has also been shaped since 2017 by the Gulf crisis, and while officials in Doha watch the moves of their Gulf and Egyptian adversaries closely (and have criticized their heavy-handed engagement in Sudan's transition), they have so far expressed little with regard to potential governance mechanisms in the Red Sea.¹¹³

Despite not being a “core” country, Kenya has been pro-active in regional fora, asserting its interests as a coastal state and port destination on the Western Indian Ocean. The newly appointed IGAD envoy for Red Sea issues is a Kenyan national, and Nairobi's engagement in part reflects its desire to assume the chair of IGAD.

PERSPECTIVES: GLOBAL ACTORS

Since their initial efforts to “midwife” the creation of a forum in September 2018, the EU and its members have found themselves “in a rather difficult position,” according to one senior diplomat.¹¹⁴ Europe’s interests in maritime security, freedom of navigation, and stable migration flows will continue, as will its normative inclination toward multilateral cooperation, but neither Brussels nor the EU’s constituent states feel they are in position to force a governance arrangement. “What leverage do we have to bring these actors to the table?” another diplomat added, echoing a core dilemma expressed by numerous European officials.¹¹⁵ The Americans could help alter that equation, they believe, given their relationships, heft, and military footprint in the region. But not only have their appeals in Washington generated little interest, European partners say they have struggled even to find a senior U.S. official with whom to regularly engage on the matter.

Once the Saudi-Egyptian initiative began making headway in early 2019, German and like-minded Europeans believed the political space for their own effort had disappeared. “We can hardly continue pursuing an alternative from outside the region,” one diplomat surmised.¹¹⁶ Another identified a more theological problem, acknowledging that Europe may have erred in too normative an approach. “We are dealing with a set of countries that don’t share our love of multilateralism,” he reflected, adding that the Saudis have little reason to cultivate a multilateral approach when they can deploy paychecks or political leverage to achieve their objective.¹¹⁷

In March 2019, the secretary-general of the United Nations appointed Parfait Onanga-Anyanga, a Gabonese national, as his special envoy for the Horn of Africa.¹¹⁸ Red Sea dynamics inevitably feature in that mandate, even if indirectly, but where the U.N. official fits in the wider context of actors and initiatives remains to be determined. His office has committed to working closely with IGAD’s Red Sea focal point in cultivating a unified position among IGAD states and signaled a readiness to provide diplomatic, financial, and logistical support to both IGAD and the AU.¹¹⁹ To this end, Parfait and his staff joined these institutional counterparts for member state consultations around the region in the summer of 2019.¹²⁰

While the Trump Administration has committed considerable energy to its Iran policy, the United States has shown comparatively little interest in the adjacent Red Sea. Though the U.S. military maintains a sizable base in Djibouti, its resident forces have historically been focused primarily on counterterrorism operations. China’s arrival and the potential for great power competition in the region has

generated new interest from Washington, though this has not yet prompted fundamental changes in U.S. security policy or a new diplomatic strategy for the region. Whether founded or not, perceptions of American withdrawal have been a defining feature of the region's changing geopolitics: a majority of regional actors express confusion over Washington's policy (or lack thereof), while some believe the White House has outsourced much of its regional foreign policy to allies in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Gulf states are not used to hearing from senior American diplomats on the Red Sea or the Horn. By demonstrating even modest interest, Washington could have an outsize impact in shaping Red Sea governance deliberations and curtailing unhelpful rivalries (including the Gulf Arab crisis), and both European actors and some African states are eager to see such involvement.¹²¹

China has expanded its presence considerably in the Horn of Africa in recent years, ostensibly with the aims of expanding and protecting trade volume born of its Belt and Road Initiative. Among the locations where this footprint has been most visible is Djibouti, where the Gulf of Aden meets the Red Sea. Global powers increasingly frame this nexus as the western flank of a security and trade corridor stretching from the Mediterranean through the Red Sea and across the Indo-Pacific axis. Chinese-financed infrastructure development in Djibouti—including a new multi-purpose port, a revamped rail link to Addis Ababa, and a free trade zone—was complemented in 2017 by the establishment of Beijing's first-ever overseas naval base.¹²² Skeptics of China's rising profile in Djibouti complain of corruption in the commercial sector and stoke fears of “debt diplomacy.”¹²³ While Djibouti's debt burden deserves attention, the likelihood of Beijing assuming control of ports or other infrastructure in lieu of such debts should not be overstated. Despite these deepening economic and security interests in the Gulf and the Horn, and important relations with governments on both shores, China has so far been publicly silent on the matter of multilateral governance in the Red Sea, seemingly content to deal bilaterally with its partners.

CONCLUSION

Thanks to an expanding conversation among diplomats, politicians, security officials, businesspeople, and institutions, the disappearing boundaries between the Gulf and Horn of Africa are now understood by an ever-widening set of actors across Africa, the Middle East, and global policy centers. Now these constituencies must go beyond recognizing the changing geopolitics and confront the question of shared governance.

A Red Sea forum can be part of the answer—especially if it is sufficiently inclusive and structured to address a range of interests, including, but not limited to, peace and security. National agendas and competition will remain, but a well-designed forum presents opportunities to amplify political and economic benefits and safeguard individual and collective interests. Architects of a Red Sea forum need not be preoccupied with the specific geopolitics of the moment, as circumstances will continue to change. Their goal should be to design a mechanism that is flexible, durable, and attractive to individual members on both shores.

For developing states in the Horn of Africa, a forum presents a platform to manage the flurry of new foreign engagement, including rebalancing what are deeply asymmetrical relationships with wealthy Gulf monarchies. After a generation of mistrust and proxy conflict in the Horn, governments in the region have begun to engage with a view to greater cooperation. Much remains to be done before trust is established, but greater coordination between these and other African stakeholders could allow the region to pivot away from a patron-client model. It could also better insulate the Horn from the kind of external shocks—such as the war in Yemen, the Gulf Arab crisis, and the rush for Red Sea real estate—that destabilized individual states in recent years and exacerbated divisions between them.

Rather than exporting Gulf rivalries to the Horn or leveraging African clients with financial largesse, Gulf states could benefit by developing a regional policy that goes beyond tactical maneuvering, paycheck diplomacy, and the courtship of (often autocratic) individuals. A multilateral forum presents an opportunity to deepen and diversify Gulf diplomacy, which is too often limited to engagement between heads of state. It also is a venue through which Gulf actors might further

develop their role as diplomatic brokers, employing resources and relationships to mitigate conflict, which in turn would create the stability necessary for greater trade and investment.

Interventions in the Horn that were balanced, broad-based, and geared toward mutual benefit would better serve the long-term strategic interests of Gulf states, and could also mark a new chapter in what has otherwise become an increasingly problematic public relations narrative. In addition to aggressive regional posturing, a disastrous war in Yemen, and a dismal record on human rights, the ongoing Gulf Arab crisis has tarnished the images of its feuding protagonists and complicated relations with external partners (including in addressing shared concerns such as Iran.) Resolving—or at least de-escalating—the standoff would lower the temperature across the region and allow both Gulf states and African allies to come to a forum free from partisan constraints.

Finally, tensions with Iran brought renewed global attention to the region in the spring of 2019. A war of words between Washington, Tehran, and Gulf capitals was followed by new military deployments, small-scale attacks on infrastructure, vessel seizures, and threats of open confrontation in the Strait of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman. The events altered the trajectory of international engagement and nuclear diplomacy with Iran, but they also demonstrate the economic interdependence of the region and the global ramifications of maritime insecurity in its waterways,¹²⁴ including in the adjacent shipping lanes of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Such events demonstrate the potential vulnerability to “extra-regional” security pressures and lend credence to arguments for Red Sea multilateralism. But they also should not unduly redirect ongoing initiatives toward Iran or security competition only.

The various initiatives undertaken in 2018–19 helped to refine the concept and objectives for a Red Sea forum, though gaps between stakeholders remain. The Saudi-Egyptian initiative may yield a formal organization in the coming months, though its ultimate structure, aims, and composition are yet to be finalized. Rather than wait for word from Saudi Arabia, stakeholders in the region, in the neighborhood, and in global capitals should engage both Riyadh and Cairo now, articulating their vision of shared governance, their desire to integrate African institutional efforts, and the kind of forum that each of them could get behind.

A new trans-regional order is in the making, though its character—as a zone of contest, or cooperation—remains to be determined. The architects of a Red Sea forum have more work to do, but stability and prosperity in this increasingly complex neighborhood depend on their project.

ENDNOTES

¹ For more on the Gulf, Horn, and new geopolitics of the Red Sea, see Zach Vertin, “Red Sea Rivalries: The Gulf States Are Playing a Dangerous Game in the Horn of Africa,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 15, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-africa/2019-01-15/red-sea-rivalries>. For more on the author’s Red Sea project, see “Zach Vertin,” Brookings Institution, accessed September 5, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/experts/zach-vertin/>.

² Experts and diplomats from Gulf and Horn states, interviews with the author, June–August 2019. For a more detailed review of historical dynamics, see Harry Verhoeven, “The Gulf and the Horn: Changing Geographies of Security Interdependence and Competing Visions of Regional Order,” *Civil Wars* 20, Issue 3 (June 12, 2018): 333–357, doi: 10.1080/13698249.2018.1483125.

³ The Horn of Africa is most often understood to include Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia, though definitions often vary in practice. For the purposes of this analysis paper, references to the Horn should also be understood to include Sudan as well as each of these countries’ maritime environs.

⁴ For a detailed review of the acquisition and development of commercial ports and military outposts in the Horn of Africa and Yemen, see “Red Sea Rivalries,” a Brookings web interactive that maps the details of each site’s terms, stakeholders, status, and supporting analysis. In addition to strategic objectives, Emirati activity is driven by its global port business and a desire to shape the future of maritime trade in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. For more, see “Red Sea rivalries: The Gulf, the Horn of Africa & the new geopolitics of the Red Sea,” Brookings Institution, interactive map, accessed September 5, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/interactives/red-sea-rivalries/>.

⁵ Concerns included fears of Iranian influence in Horn capitals, illicit weapon flows to Iranian proxies, and a fear that Tehran’s navy might threaten energy flows through the Bab al Mandab. This contest marked a crescendo in September 2014, when, after a sustained Saudi campaign and financial incentives, Sudan closed Iranian cultural centers and expelled affiliated Iranian personnel from the country. While cooperation between the two had been comparatively minimal, Riyadh and allied governments saw the decision as a major victory. See Brian Murphy, “Sudan pushes back against Iran: Cultural centers closed, envoys banished,” *The Washington Post*, September 2, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/sudan-pushes-back-against-iran-cultural-centers-closed-envoys-banished/2014/09/02/27d3deec-32ba-11e4-a723-fa3895a25d02_story.html?utm_term=.c230e350ad9f.

⁶ Some interpret the changing external environment as Washington outsourcing regional security policy to Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and to some extent Tel Aviv. Whether the change represents a deliberate outsourcing decision, or whether those players have identified, and are filling, a perceived vacuum, few disagree that the perceptions have altered the security context and the calculations of regional actors.

⁷ Aziz El Yaakoubi and Johan Sennero, “Yemen’s warring parties agree to ceasefire in Hodeidah and U.N. role,” Reuters, December 13, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/yemens-warring-parties-agree-to-ceasefire-in-hodeidah-and-un-role-idUSKBN1OC0G4>.

⁸ For example, Gulf state support for the preliminary rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea was critical. Contrary to widespread reporting that Saudi and Emirati officials “brokered” the September 2018 peace pact, however, there is little evidence to suggest they played so active a role. While they provided an international forum and important incentives, such accounts underestimate the domestic political drivers behind the peace pact while over-stating the depth of Gulf expertise on domestic and regional politics in the Horn.

⁹ France, Japan, and Italy also operate military facilities in Djibouti, while India and Saudi Arabia have also signaled interest in potential military facilities. Other visiting international contingents—e.g. Germany and Spain—have operated out of Djibouti while deployed on multilateral counter-piracy deployments.

¹⁰ Patricia Zengerle, “U.S. senators alarmed if China gets control of Djibouti port,” Reuters, November 14, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-congress/u-s-senators-alarmed-if-china-gets-control-of-djibouti-port-idUSKCN1NI2YM>.

¹¹ The White House, “Remarks by National Security Advisor Ambassador John R. Bolton on the Trump Administration’s New Africa Strategy,” December 13, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-national-security-advisor-ambassador-john-r-bolton-trump-administrations-new-africa-strategy/>; U.S. policy experts on Africa, interviews with the author, Washington, December 2018.

¹² For more on these dynamics and the history of foreign security engagement in the region, see Neil Melvin, “The New External Security Politics of the Horn of Africa Region,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Insights Paper, April 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2019/sipri-insights-peace-and-security/new-external-security-politics-horn-africa-region> and Neil Melvin, “Managing the New External Security Politics of the Horn of Africa Region,” SIPRI, Policy Brief, April 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2019/sipri-policy-briefs/managing-new-external-security-politics-horn-africa-region>.

¹³ In some cases, new and planned development amounts to rehabilitation of aging and/or defunct ports and infrastructure, such as the Djibouti-Ethiopia railway or the once-busy Eritrean port of Assab.

¹⁴ For example, between January and July of 2019, more than 84,000 economic migrants arrived in Yemen from points of departure in Somalia and Djibouti. The majority of them were Ethiopian nationals and reported Saudi Arabia as their intended destination. See International Organization for Migration (IOM), “Yemen—Flow Monitoring Points | Migrant Arrivals And Yemeni Returns From Saudi Arabia From January To June 2019,” August 5, 2019, <https://migration.iom.int/reports/yemen-%E2%80%94-flow-monitoring-points-migrant-arrivals-and-yemeni-returns-saudi-arabia-january-june>.

¹⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “Total Arrivals from Yemen in the Region,” June 30, 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/yemen>.

¹⁶ Zach Vertin, “Red Sea blueprints: Designing a forum for Gulf and Horn states,” *Order from Chaos*, March 12, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/03/12/red-sea-blueprints/>.

¹⁷ Eritrean, Egyptian, and Yemeni diplomats, interviews with the author, November 2018–July 2019. Saudi fact sheet shared with author by Saudi Foreign Ministry, July 2019.

¹⁸ Though nine Nile basin countries have been involved in water rights negotiations to date, tensions have been most acute between Egypt and Ethiopia. For more on regional tensions over Nile water and Ethiopia’s Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, see International Crisis Group, “Bridging the Gap in the Nile Waters Dispute,” Report No. 271, March 20, 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/271-bridging-gap-nile-waters-dispute>.

¹⁹ Egyptian diplomats, interviews with the author, Cairo, Abu Dhabi, Washington, December 2018–June 2019; Western diplomats, interviews with the author, April 2019.

²⁰ Vertin, “Red Sea blueprints.”

²¹ Ibid.

²² Baltic Council member states include: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Russia, and Sweden, as well as the European Commission. Eleven others participate as observers: Belarus, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Ukraine, United Kingdom, the United States, and Hungary. For more on the Baltic Sea council, see “Council of Baltic Sea States,” accessed May 2019, <http://www.cbss.st/organisation/>.

²³ Internal EU policy memo on European support for Red Sea governance, April 2016, obtained by author. The memo emphasizes the value of multiple fora in the Baltic Sea with subtly different aims and memberships. Baltic Cooperation is also framed by an EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), a policy intended to use “existing legislation, existing financial resources and existing institutions” to boost cooperation among members. For more, see also “Baltic Cooperation,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, accessed June 2019, <http://um.dk/en/foreign-policy/baltic-sea-cooperation/>.

²⁴ Non-paper, written by Finland and Sweden (and co-sponsored by Latvia and Poland), “Inspiration paper on the Baltic Sea cooperation for other geographical areas including the Red Sea region,” February 2019, obtained by author.

²⁵ Facilitated by the Helsinki-based NGO (Crisis Management Initiative—CMI), the study tour convened representatives from regional institutions, think tanks, and research institutions from the region to hear briefings on a range of cooperative mechanisms and to consider lessons learned—“with a view to informing the ongoing dialogue among Red Sea stakeholders;” “Baltic Sea Study Tour Concept Paper,” undated, obtained by author.

²⁶ ASEAN members include: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. ASEAN, “The Association of South East Asian Nations, Member States,” accessed June 19, 2019, <https://asean.org/asean/asean-member-states/>.

²⁷ ASEAN, “The ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration), 8 August 1967,” accessed June 2019, <https://asean.org/the-asean-declaration-bangkok-declaration-bangkok-8-august-1967/>.

²⁸ Kishore Mahbubani and Rhoda Severino, “ASEAN: The way forward,” *McKinsey & Company*, May 2014, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/asean-the-way-forward>.

²⁹ For assessments of ASEAN’s origins, evolution, and performance, see United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), “ASEAN AT 50: Achievements and Challenges in Regional Integration,” 2017, 54, https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/gdsecidc2017d2_en.pdf and Lindsey Ford, “Does ASEAN Matter?” Asia Society Policy Institute, November 12, 2018, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/does-asean-matter>.

³⁰ Nguyen Minh Quang, “Saving the China-ASEAN South China Sea Code of Conduct,” *The Diplomat*, June 29, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/saving-the-china-asean-south-china-sea-code-of-conduct/>.

³¹ Other Red Sea initiatives have been spearheaded by non-governmental organizations during the same period. Most notably, in April 2019, three U.S. government-funded institutions—the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies, and the United States Institute of Peace—partnered together in another effort to bring Red Sea states around a common table, inviting military and diplomatic representatives to discuss “Emerging Maritime Security Challenges.” It was the first in a series of unofficial dialogues designed to focus on issues that emphasize the upside of trans-regional cooperation. The meeting demonstrated that troublesome regional rivalries could be bridged, though questions over membership, aims, and Western engagement in Red Sea governance persisted. Some participating states report having interpreted the meeting as a Trump administration initiative implemented by U.S. government-affiliated think tanks. Despite these misconceptions, the hosting institutions were not acting on a mandate from the American government, but were in fact hoping, in part, to encourage greater engagement from U.S. policymakers. A follow-on dialogue is intended for late 2019 with the aim of further developing ideas and building confidence among littoral states, neighboring states, and the wider field of engaged international partners. Such informal platforms are important in narrowing gaps and demonstrating the potential value of shared governance.

³² In addition to its traditional role as a development donor in Horn countries, EU engagement on the changing dynamics in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden emerged in part out of its participation in international anti-piracy campaigns dating back to 2008. Drawing naval forces from around the world, these missions sought to protect European and global trade interests that were increasingly vulnerable to Somali-based piracy. (For more, see: “EU Navfor Somalia Mission,” European Union External Action, accessed June 2019, <https://eunavfor.eu/mission/>.) EU engagement deepened again in 2015 as the European migration crisis added another layer to member-state interests in the region. EU External Action Service officials, interviews and email communication with the author, July 2019.

³³ Council of the European Union, “Council Conclusions on the EU Horn of Africa Regional Action Plan 2015–2020,” October 26, 2015, <http://statewatch.org/docbin/eu-council-horn-of-africa-conclusions-13363-15.pdf>.

³⁴ Council of the European Union, “Council Conclusions on the Horn of Africa/Red Sea,” June 25, 2018, <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10027-2018-INIT/en/pdf>.

³⁵ In addition to its initial convening effort, the EU has since pledged political and financial support to IGAD’s Red Sea initiative and is currently considering a \$2 million support package. The EU previously provided financial support for the AUHIP effort to develop a peace and security strategy, including with regard to a wider Red Sea mandate, while individual European states, including Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland have also provided financial support for budding AU and IGAD efforts.

³⁶ Berlin’s engagement was driven by the foreign ministry’s directorate for the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, headed by Philipp Ackermann. Because Germany did not have a specific national interest or presence in the Red Sea, it believed it might be well positioned to play a facilitation role. German officials, interviews with the author, May and July 2019.

³⁷ European diplomats, interview with the author, New York, September 2018.

³⁸ AU Peace and Security Council, “The 750th meeting of the AU Peace and Security Council on the activities of the AU High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) for Sudan and South Sudan,” February 6, 2018, para. 17 (xi–xii), <http://www.peaceau.org/en/article/the-750th-meeting-of-the-au-peace-and-security-council-on-the-activities-of-the-au-high-level-implementation-panel-auhip-for-sudan-and-south-sudan>. The origin of the Mbeki Panel dates back to 2008, and its original incarnation as the AU Panel on Darfur (AUPD). It became the AUHIP in October 2009, when its mandate was first expanded to address peace and democratization in Sudan and South Sudan.

³⁹ AU Peace and Security Council, “The 750th meeting of the AU Peace and Security Council,” para. 15.

⁴⁰ AU Peace and Security Council, “The 811th meeting of the AU Peace and Security Council on the activities of the AU High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) for Sudan and South Sudan,” November 22, 2018, para. 15–16, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/psc.811comm.auhip_.22.11.2018.pdf.

⁴¹ Some political analysts argue President Isaias’ aversion to multilateralism, as referenced here and in the following sections, is a product of multiple campaigns—led by previous Ethiopian administrations, through IGAD—to isolate Eritrea. These attempts, they argue, were backed by past U.S. administrations and enabled by relative silence from the AU.

⁴² AU official, telephone interview with the author, June 2019.

⁴³ Egyptian and Western officials, interviews with the author, Washington, Cairo, June–July 2019; AU official, telephone interview with the author, June 2019.

⁴⁴ AU official, telephone interview with the author, June and August 2019. Though the AU/IGAD/U.N. envoys would also like to visit Eritrea, Asmara has not agreed to consultations. The AUHIP, in consultation with other AU bodies, IGAD, and the U.N., had in late 2017 set forth an ambitious plan for a Horn of Africa working group and a support research agenda, parts of which included better understanding the policies of Middle Eastern states toward the Horn, and assessing the Red Sea as a zone of new security competition. “Working Group on the Horn of Africa in support of the African Union High Level Implementation Panel,” Draft Concept Note, November 2017, obtained by author.

⁴⁵ Despite initial AU queries, the Saudis have reportedly not yet agreed to a meeting with the Mbeki panel, which is ostensibly intent to establish its own initiative and engage partner states and institutions thereafter. Given the country's close relationship to Riyadh, Djiboutian officials have signaled their willingness to try to facilitate such a meeting once AU/IGAD/U.N. consultations are complete, and if/when all IGAD member-states consent to the idea. AU and senior Djiboutian officials, telephone interviews with the author, August 2019.

⁴⁶ AU and U.N. officials, African and European diplomats, Western political analysts, interviews with the author, Addis Ababa, December 2018 and Washington, April 2019; telephone interviews with the author, May 2019, July 2019.

⁴⁷ Intergovernmental Authority on Development, "Communiqué Of The 46th Ordinary Session Of IGAD Council Of Ministers," February 27, 2019, <https://igad.int/attachments/article/2057/Final%20Communique%20of%20the%2046th%20Ordinary%20Session%20of%20IGAD%20Council%20of%20Ministers.pdf>; Intergovernmental Authority On Development, "IGAD Establishes Taskforce On The Red Sea And The Gulf Of Aden," April 4, 2019, <https://igad.int/Programs/66-Somalia/2096-Igad-Establishes-Taskforce-On-The-Red-Sea-And-The-Gulf-Of-Aden>; Regional foreign policy experts, interviews with the author, July 2019.

⁴⁸ IGAD has invited member states to appoint three representatives each to the taskforce, representing various branches of their governments and militaries. IGAD-accredited ambassadors will also participate in taskforce deliberations. IGAD official, telephone interview with the author, August 2019. Guyo traveled with Mbeki to Egypt, Kenya, Uganda, Somalia, and Djibouti on visits between May and August 2019.

⁴⁹ After more than a decade holding what is meant to be a rotating chairmanship, Abiy also signaled in mid-2018 that Ethiopia would relinquish the IGAD chairmanship. Kenya was reportedly set to assume the seat, though Sudan also had a rotational claim on the seat. Institutional politics prevented consensus, and the fate of the chairmanship remains uncertain.

⁵⁰ Regional foreign policy experts, AU and IGAD officials, interviews with the author, April–August 2019.

⁵¹ Egyptian diplomats, interview with the author, Cairo, July 2019.

⁵² European diplomat, telephone interview with the author, June 2019.

⁵³ Egyptian diplomat, interview with the author, May 2019.

⁵⁴ Expert on Gulf aid, interview with the author, July 2019. For more on aid and investment figures from 2013 to 2016, see: Abdel Monem Said Aly and Hussein Ibish, "Egypt-GCC Partnership: Bedrock of Regional Security Despite Fissures," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, Gulf Rising Series*, December 12, 2016, https://agsiw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Hussein_AbdelMonem_GCCEgypt_ONLINE-1.pdf. Saudi and other Gulf interventions have come in the form of central bank deposits, "favorable loans, in-kind donations of oil and gas shipments, and promises of foreign direct investment in sectors like real estate and agriculture." See Karen Young, "How Egypt wound up in the center of a Gulf Cooperation Council dispute on Qatar," *The Washington Post*, August 23, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/23/how-egypt-wound-up-in-the-center-of-a-gulf-corporation-council-dispute-on-qatar/?utm_term=.d999582c3a76.

⁵⁵ The dynamic has also penetrated domestic politics. President el-Sissi was met with extraordinary domestic backlash in April 2016 after agreeing to give two Egyptian islands in the Red Sea—Tiran and Sanafir—to Saudi Arabia. Critics accused him of treachery, arguing he was beholden to financial overlords in Saudi Arabia. For more, see: Declan Walsh, “Despite Public Outcry, Egypt to Transfer Islands to Saudi Arabia,” *The New York Times*, June 14, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/14/world/middleeast/egypt-saudi-arabia-islands-sisi.html>.

⁵⁶ Former senior government official, interview with the author, Cairo, July 2019.

⁵⁷ Prior to assuming the post in February 2018, Minister for African Affairs Ahmed Abdul Aziz Kattan had served as the Kingdom’s ambassador to Egypt over the course of seven critical years (2011–2018).

⁵⁸ Western diplomat, interview with the author, April 2019.

⁵⁹ Bruce Riedel, “As the Saudis host international summitry, their Yemen problem isn’t going away,” *Order from Chaos*, May 28, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/05/28/as-the-saudis-host-international-summitry-their-yemen-problem-isnt-going-away/>.

⁶⁰ At the time of publication, Saudi Arabia had not announced plans to convene another Red Sea summit. It had, however, circulated invitations for a wider Saudi-Africa summit and the 5th Arab-Africa Summit—both to be convened in Riyadh in late November 2019. Diplomats in various Red Sea states believe they may use the opportunity to finalize a Red Sea organization as well.

⁶¹ “Al-bayan al-khitami, al-sadir ‘an al-’ijtima‘ al-’awwal rafi‘ al-mustawa, “Al-salam wa al-’aman wa al-rakha’ fi mintaqat al-bahr al-’ahmar: nahwa ’itar ‘arabi wa ’ifriqi lil-ta’awun [Final statement, issued by the first high-level meeting, “Peace, security, and prosperity in the Red Sea region: towards an Arab and African framework for cooperation”], Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Arab Republic of Egypt, December 12, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2XJxggF>. Importantly, Eritrea was absent from the meeting, while Somalia was not invited, as the initiative had not yet expanded to include the Gulf of Aden.

⁶² Egyptian officials, interview with the author, Cairo, July 2019.

⁶³ Regional and Western diplomats, interviews with the author, February–May 2019.

⁶⁴ Egyptian officials, interview with the author, Cairo, July 2019.

⁶⁵ Vertin, “Red Sea blueprints.” Palpable tensions persist over water and a hiatus in technical negotiations over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). While talks over the GERD began in 2011, Egyptian officials express frustration that talks are currently “going nowhere.” Cairo is cautiously optimistic about new Prime Minister Abiy, someone who “does not have the complex of the old guard,” but while they see his signals so far as positive, they are awaiting action, and worry about members of the previous Ethiopian regime continuing to wield influence on water issues. Egyptian diplomats, interviews with the author, Washington, May 2019 and Cairo, July 2019. Egyptian officials also cite tensions arising from their experience of IGAD exclusion. “If they are going to exclude us,” one explained, “we aren’t necessarily going to be enthusiastic about inviting them to join a Red Sea organization.”

⁶⁶ Eritrea's no-show was unsurprising to regional actors familiar with Asmara's demonstrated aversion to multilateralism. Some participants and observers also attributed Eritrea's absence to changing regional politics and its budding rapprochement with Ethiopia.

⁶⁷ Participants included: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Djibouti, Sudan, Somalia and Yemen; *Al Jazeera*, "Saudi Arabia seeks new political bloc in strategic Red Sea region," December 13, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/saudi-arabia-seeks-political-bloc-strategic-red-sea-region-181213065422911.html>. See also Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Arab Republic of Egypt, "Foreign Ministry hosts 3rd Meeting of Senior Officials of Countries Bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden," March 11, 2019, <https://www.mfa.gov.eg/english/MediaCenter/News/Pages/Rye00.aspx>.

⁶⁸ "Draft: Charter for the Establishment of the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden," undated, obtained by author. In addition to concerns about structure, the Egyptians also thought it odd that the Saudis chose Riyadh over Jeddah, given the latter's position on the Red Sea.

⁶⁹ Saudi officials have reportedly "notified" President el-Sissi that the idea of commissions based in multiple capitals is, for them, a non-starter. Senior Saudi official, interview with the author, Jeddah, July 2019.

⁷⁰ Senior Saudi official, interview.

⁷¹ "Draft: Charter for the Establishment of the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden," obtained by author. Other Saudi sources, such as Gulf Cooperation Council Assistant-Secretary-General Abdel Aziz Aluwaisheg, likewise suggest a predominant focus on security threats; see Abdel Aziz Aluwaisheg, "Why Red Sea security is a global concern," *Arab News*, April 1, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1476051>.

⁷² "Saudi Arabia's defense ministry concludes naval drills for Red Sea countries," *Arab News*, January 4, 2019, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1430016/saudi-arabia>.

⁷³ The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Washington D.C., "Arab and African Countries Establish New Entity to Safeguard the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden," December 18, 2018, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/news/arab-and-african-countries-establish-new-entity-safeguard-red-sea-and-gulf-aden>.

⁷⁴ Egyptian and Eritrean diplomats, interviews with the author, May and July 2019.

⁷⁵ Egyptian diplomat, former senior government official, interviews with the author, Cairo, July 2019.

⁷⁶ Senior Saudi diplomat, interview with the author, Jeddah, July 2019.

⁷⁷ Government officials and observers from Red Sea states, interviews with the author, regional capitals, April–July 2019.

⁷⁸ Ambassador from Gulf region, interview with the author, Washington, May 2019.

⁷⁹ “We must deal with Sudan first,” one Saudi official explained, emphasizing the attention and capital Riyadh has attached to a transitional governance deal in Sudan. “But then we will immediately move to finalize the Red Sea Council,” he added. Senior Saudi official, interview with the author.

⁸⁰ For more in-depth analysis, see: Vertin, “Red Sea Rivalries: The Gulf States Are Playing a Dangerous Game in the Horn of Africa,” or Verhoeven, “The Gulf and the Horn: Changing Geographies of Security Interdependence and Competing Visions of Regional Order.”

⁸¹ Following the outbreak of war in Yemen in 2015, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi agreed to a new security deal with Eritrea as they sought to establish a military base at Eritrea’s Red Sea port of Assab. That new outpost quickly came online but was eventually deemed to be in violation of standing U.N. sanctions against Eritrea, giving the Gulf states a stake in ending Eritrea’s international isolation, including the decade-old punitive measures. In September 2018, the Saudis helped grease Eritrea’s historic peace pact with Ethiopia and helped to lend the affair international legitimacy by hosting a signing ceremony in Jeddah that was attended by the U.N. secretary-general, the chairperson of the AU commission, and other dignitaries. They also reportedly pledged to Asmara that they would help lobby for sanctions relief. Soon thereafter, Eritrea appealed for sanctions relief and the decade-old measures were rescinded—on November 14, 2018—with support from both Ethiopia and the United States. In addition to reports of Saudi financial aid, infrastructure promises, and fuel supplies to Eritrea, Riyadh has also helped to try to resolve the long-standing rift between Eritrea and neighboring Djibouti.

⁸² Eritrean diplomat, interview with the author, July 2019.

⁸³ Eritrea—Ministry of Information, “Eritrea’s Statement at the Meeting of High-Level Officials of Red Sea and Gulf of Aden,” accessed April 25, 2019, <http://shabait.com/news/local-news/28380-eritreas-statement-at-the-meeting-of-high-level-officials-of-red-sea-and-gulf-of-aden>.

⁸⁴ Eritrean diplomat, interview with the author, July 2019.

⁸⁵ Yemen also figures in Eritrea’s regional considerations. While the Saudi-UAE coalition has launched assaults into Yemen from a military base in Assab since 2015, the issue is not without domestic political complications. “For many in the South of Eritrea, Yemen is their daily market,” one Eritrean diplomat explained, arguing that Saudi-UAE bombings had negatively impacted some Eritrean communities and Eritrean public opinion.

⁸⁶ Regional diplomat, interview with the author, Cairo, July 2019.

⁸⁷ Regional diplomats and observers, Western diplomat, interviews with the author, June and July 2019.

⁸⁸ Following four months of negotiations, Sudanese military leaders and political opposition groups agreed in August 2019 to establish a transitional government for a period of three years. Atop a new eleven-member sovereign council are General Abdel-Fattah al-Burhan and other influential military figures who have enjoyed close cooperation with Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Cairo.

⁸⁹ Senior Foreign Ministry official, interview with the author, Djibouti, May 2019; Senior Yemeni diplomats, interviews and telephone interviews with the author, Washington, June 2019.

⁹⁰ See, for example: “Israel breaks Lebanon Ceasefire,” *Executive Intelligence Review* 4, no 42 (October 18, 1977): 44, <https://larouchepub.com/eiw/public/1977/eirv04n42-19771018/eirv04n42-19771018.pdf>.

⁹¹ UNHCR, “Total Arrivals from Yemen in the Region.” Figures as of June 30, 2019.

⁹² UNHCR, “Global Focus—Yemen 2019,” accessed September 15, 2019, <http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2647?y=2019#year>. Figures are regularly reported by both the IOM and UNHCR, but each note the difficulties in accurately monitoring migration flows between Yemen and the Horn.

⁹³ Senior Yemeni diplomat, interview with the author, May 2019.

⁹⁴ Somali diplomats, interviews with the author, Abu Dhabi, Doha, June 2019.

⁹⁵ In 2017, the Farmajo government came under pressure from the UAE and its Gulf partners to choose sides in the emerging dispute with Qatar and Turkey. When Farmajo resisted, relations with the UAE eventually deteriorated, and Emirati officials turned their resources and attention instead to Somalia’s federal states and breakaway regions, aggravating tensions between the fragile country’s center and its peripheries.

⁹⁶ Somali political analyst, telephone interview with the author, July 2019. Somali diplomat, interview with the author, June 2019.

⁹⁷ IGAD official, regional foreign policy experts, telephone interview and email correspondence with the author, July and August 2019. While many regional officials are privately sympathetic to Somaliland’s position, they note that a decision to include it would be politically untenable.

⁹⁸ Despite its close Saudi ties, Djiboutian officials privately express regret over having taken sides in the GCC crisis, siding with allies Riyadh and Abu Dhabi in the wake of the 2017 dispute. They also weathered a diplomatic and public relations crisis after U.S. concerns emerged over China’s growing influence. Senior Djiboutian official, port officials, foreign diplomats, interviews with the author, Djibouti, April 2019.

⁹⁹ Senior Djiboutian foreign ministry official, interview with the author, Djibouti, April 2019. Djiboutian diplomats, telephone interview with the author, August 2019. The premium Djibouti places on its relationship with Riyadh is evident in sometimes fawning public statements about the Kingdom. President Ismail Omar Guelleh expressed absolute solidarity in a May 2019 visit to Riyadh, praising Saudi Arabia's centrality to Djibouti's securing independence and hailing it as "the leader of Arabs and Muslims." Fatehelrahman Yousif, "Djibouti President to Asharq Al-Awsat: Saudi Arabia's Hosting of Arab, Islamic Summits Boosts Unity," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 23, 2019, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1735691/djibouti-president-asharq-al-awsat-saudi-arabia%E2%80%99s-hosting-arab-islamic-summits>. The Saudis have also offered their mediation services, offering to help Djibouti repair relations with UAE port conglomerate, DP World, as well as with Eritrea.

¹⁰⁰ IGAD official, telephone interview with the author, August 2019.

¹⁰¹ Djiboutian diplomats, telephone interviews with the author, August 2019. AU officials report that the Djiboutian government encouraged the AU, IGAD, and U.N. envoys to pay a visit to Riyadh with the aim of harmonizing the two efforts. AU official, telephone interview and email correspondence with the author, August 2019.

¹⁰² "Netanyahu calls for Israel-Ethiopia security coordination," *Middle East Monitor*, September 2, 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190902-netanyahu-calls-for-israel-ethiopia-security-coordination/>. Historically Israel has also been concerned by the transshipment of weapons from Iran, via the Horn, to Hamas elements in Gaza. In this context, Israel launched airstrikes against suspected weapons convoys and munitions facilities in Sudan in 2009, 2012, and 2014. For example, see: Ian Black, "Israeli attack' on Sudanese arms factory offers glimpse of secret war," *The Guardian*, October 25, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/25/israeli-sudanese-factory-secret-war>.

¹⁰³ Israel was not invited to participate in the Saudi-Egyptian initiative toward development of a "Red Sea Council."

¹⁰⁴ Finland's Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) convened informal dialogues in Amman and January and April 2019. Three American institutes also intend to convene a second dialogue in Amman in late 2019. For more detail on these lower-profile initiatives, see endnotes 25 and 31 above.

¹⁰⁵ Ethiopian diplomats, Western analysts, interviews and telephone interviews with the author, July 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Ethiopian Ambassador to Egypt, interview with the author, Cairo, July 2019.

¹⁰⁷ Ethiopian foreign policy analyst, telephone interview with the author, May 2019.

¹⁰⁸ Senior Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) official, interview with the author, Addis Ababa, December 2018; Academic expert, Doha, June 2019; Ethiopian security analyst, interview with the author, June 2019.

¹⁰⁹ "Qatar's Ambassador to Ethiopia: Abiy Ahmed's Visit to Doha Enhances Stability in the Horn of Africa," Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed July 8, 2019, <https://www.mofa.gov.qa/en/all-mofa-news/details/2019/03/19/qatar's-ambassador-to-ethiopia-abiy-ahmed's-visit-to-doha-enhances-stability-in-the-horn-of-africa>.

¹¹⁰ Senior official from Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, interview with the author, March 2019.

¹¹¹ For examples, see: 'Imad al-Din Adib, "'Umar al-bashir wa al-intihar al-siyyasi'" [Omar al-Bashir and Political Suicide], *El Watan News*, December 27, 2018, <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/2886182> and George Mikhail, "Tension keeps rising in Cairo over Turkey-Sudan island pact," *Al Monitor*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/01/sudan-turkey-deal-suakin-island-threatens-egypt-security.html>.

¹¹² For more on Turkey's posture in the Horn of Africa, see: Zach Vertin, "Turkey and the New Scramble for Africa; Ottoman Designs or Unfounded Fears?" *Lawfare*, May 19, 2019, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/turkey-and-new-scramble-africa-ottoman-designs-or-unfounded-fears>.

¹¹³ Senior Qatari diplomats, interviews with the author, Doha, June and August 2019.

¹¹⁴ EU diplomat, telephone interview with the author, April 2019.

¹¹⁵ European diplomat, interview with the author, May 2019.

¹¹⁶ European diplomat, interview.

¹¹⁷ European diplomat, telephone interview with the author, June 2019.

¹¹⁸ "Secretary-General Appoints Parfait Onanga-Anyanga of Gabon Special Envoy for Horn of Africa," United Nations, accessed July 9, 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sga1864.doc.htm>.

¹¹⁹ U.N. official, telephone interview with the author, July 2019.

¹²⁰ U.N. official, email correspondence with the author, August 2019.

¹²¹ To start, the U.S. State Department's top Africa and Near East diplomats could together undertake a joint tour of the Red Sea region, potentially accompanied by counterparts from the Defense Department and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). David Schenker, who was appointed Assistant Secretary of Near Eastern Affairs in June 2019, has demonstrated interest in Gulf engagement in the Horn and an appreciation of Red Sea dynamics to his mandate. Current and former U.S. diplomats, interviews with the author, Washington, February and July 2019.

¹²² For more details, “Red Sea rivalries: The Gulf, the Horn of Africa & the new geopolitics of the Red Sea,” Brookings Institution, interactive map.

¹²³ Western ambassadors, Djiboutian commercial actors, foreign ministry officials, interviews with the author, Djibouti, April 2019.

¹²⁴ Tensions with Iran provided the backdrop for July 2019 naval exercises in the Red Sea, an annual drill undertaken between Egypt, the United States, and the UAE, which this year included specialized naval and coast guard personnel, frigates, missile-launching boats, mine hunters, and F16 aircraft. Saudi Arabia also participated in the exercise.

“Egypt, US, UAE conclude joint naval drill,” *Egypt Today*, August 4, 2019, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/73522/Egypt-US-UAE-conclude-joint-naval-drill>.

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