

# **Towards Africa:**

## **The Struggle over the Horn of Africa**



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## Towards Africa: The Struggle over the Horn of Africa

### Introduction

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The Horn of Africa shall be the focus point, because there is currently a struggle between regional and international powers to exert influence over it due to its strategic and geopolitical importance, as we shall recognize. Sea lanes are one of the most important elements of power and influence for those who can control them, due to their strategic role in maintaining the international and regional security. Sea lanes are considered as the main basis for resolving conflicts and regional and international control. From this point of view, the Horn of Africa is of great importance because it represents the most important sea lanes at the regional and international levels. The Horn of Africa region also represents the most important factors of regional balance and stability, due to its distinctive geographical location and great strategic, military, political and economic significance due to its overlooking of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. The strategic importance of the region is based on its proximity to Bab al-Mandeb Strait, which controls the Red Sea from the south. This makes it a region of competition between all the greedy foreign powers in the Red Sea and the east of Africa as a whole.

The Horn of Africa region has been the focus of many regional and international powers, for geopolitical and strategic considerations, as it is the crossing and the main artery for international trade. This results from the extension of its water crossings from Bab al-Mandab to the Red Sea. It is also considered the central gateway for oil tankers coming from the Gulf and a corridor for the military movements of some of the major powers heading to the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf. All of this contributed to the intensification of international and regional competition for a position of influence in the region. However, what complicated the general scene in



recent decades is the contribution of geostrategic shifts in the world to the upgrading of the Horn of Africa as an arena for rearranging the balance of power between these forces, to enhance influence and establish their presence through military and economic mechanisms.

## Maritime ports in the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa is the region extended to include Eritrea, Somalia, half of Djibouti and one fifth the area of Ethiopia, totally estimated by about 450,000 square miles.

East Africa is rich in a large number of maritime ports along the coast of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. There are more than eight developed maritime ports in the Horn of Africa in Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan and Kenya on the Red Sea, most prominent of which are:

**1. The Eritrean port of Assab:** The port is located in the far south of the Eritrea. It has an important strategic location, due to its geographical proximity to Bab al-Mandab Strait at the southern entrance to the Red Sea, which is 20 nautical miles away. It is also close to the border, and some Yemeni ports, such as the port of Mocha, which is only about 40 nautical miles away.

**2. The Eritrean port of Massawa:** It is the main port in Eritrea, and the largest and most active in comparison to the port of Assab. It is in the middle of the Eritrean sea coast, and its strategic importance is increasing due to its location near Bab al-Mandab Strait, as well as Yemen and the Arabian Gulf region.

**3. The Port of Djibouti:** It is located at the southern entrance to the Red



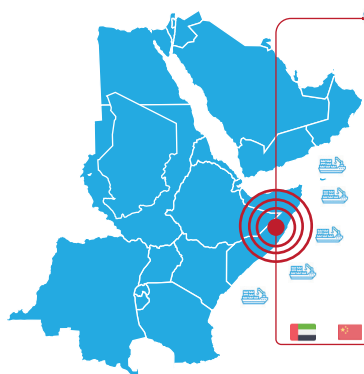
Sea and is considered as one of the main export ports in East Africa. It is also a vital link and gateway to the markets of East and Central African countries and a regional center for the transport of goods. It overlooks Bab al-Mandeb strait, which has great geostrategic importance, and Beijing relies on it as one of the main ports in East Africa as part of the Belt and Road Initiative launched in 2013.

**4. Berbera Port:** This port is located in the Somaliland region. It is one of the oldest Somali ports. Some expansions are underway in the port to accommodate more containers and goods. This port is described as the key to the Red Sea. And In regards to security, stability for Somaliland is a strong incentive to rely on the port in the future, both commercially and militarily, as it is seen as a possible future alternative to the port of Djibouti in the region.

**5. Mogadishu Port:** It is the largest port in Somalia and can handle various sizes of merchant ships. It is of strategic importance as it overlooks the coast of the Indian Ocean, and this port is located within the strategic belt of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

**6. Bosaso Port:** This is the second largest port in Somalia after Mogadishu, and it overlooks the Gulf of Aden. It is distinguished by its location near the entrance to Bab al-Mandab Strait, facing the Yemeni sea coast, specifically the port of Mukalla.

**7. Hobyo Port:** It is located in northeastern Somalia near the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandab Strait, representing a link between northern and southern Somalia. It represents a gateway for oil exports from the Ogaden region in Ethiopia to the world.



Kingdom of Saudi Arabia announced the launch of a new shipping line.

Turkey continues to strengthen its presence by controlling the port of Mogadishu.

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## Manifestations of competition in the Horn of Africa

The escalating international and regional competition over the Horn of Africa has taken many forms, the most important of which are investing in commercial ports, concluding economic cooperation agreements, establishing military bases and installations, securing strategic choke points (Bab al-Mandab Strait), and investing heavily in infrastructure and free commercial areas. These are the most important countries competing for the Horn region:

**1. China:** China remains the main player and partner for most of the region's ports in recent years, within the framework of the pivotal role it plays in the development of these ports as part of the completion of the Belt and Road Initiative, of which the Red Sea region is a major part. China has financed several infrastructure and development projects in the region, such as the 750-km railway linking Ethiopia and the port of Djibouti, worth US\$4 billion. There is also a project to establish a marine line linking China and oil wells in the Ogaden region in eastern Ethiopia through the Somali port of Hobyo.

**2. UAE:** DP World is significantly active in the Horn of Africa, as it implements a number of projects in some ports, such as the management of Bosaso port in Somalia, the ports of Massawa and Assab of Eritrea, and the expansion of Berbera port in Somaliland to raise its capacity to handle more than 500,000 containers per annum. The first phase of the development process is scheduled to be completed by the first quarter of 2021. This project is considered as a logistical gateway to the center and east of Africa, in addition to it being a hub for container traffic on trade routes between Asia, the Middle East and Europe, which enhances the position of the Port of Berbera as a major regional commercial port serving the Horn of Africa.

**3. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:** On its part, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia announced the launch of a new shipping line in March 2020, linking the Saudi ports of King Fahd and Jeddah with the ports of Somalia, with the aim of increasing trade exchange, and linking Saudi ports with East African ports.

**4. Turkey:** In Somalia, Turkey continues to strengthen its presence by controlling the port of Mogadishu, where the Turkish Albayrak Group, has been operating the port since 2014 and signed a new 14-year concession agreement with the Somali government in October 2020 to manage and operate the port, after negotiating a re-sharing of the profits between them.

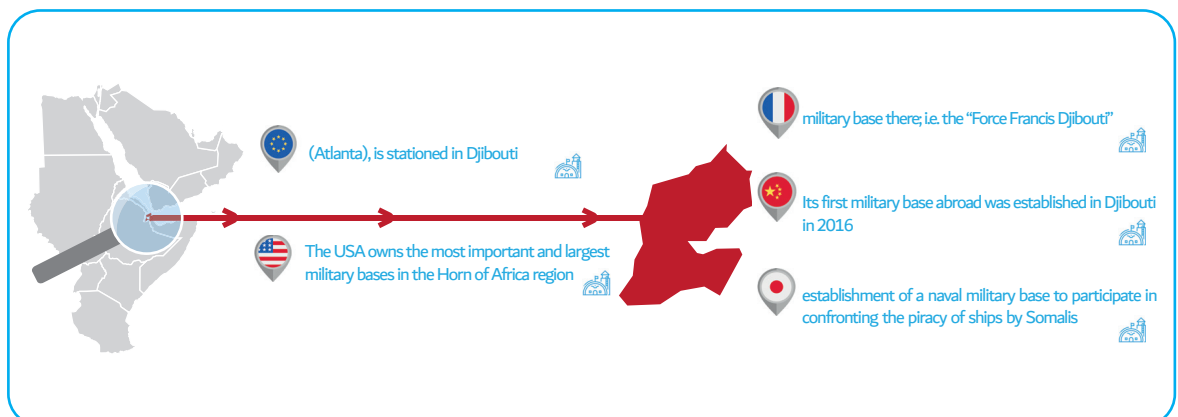
In an indication of strengthening its influence in the Horn of Africa, Turkey announced the inauguration of a shipping line linking Ankara with Somalia and Djibouti by sea, reducing the period of delivery of goods from 35-55 days to 9-10 days, thus enhancing trade exchange between Turkey and the countries of the region.

## The Military Conflict of International Powers in the Horn of Africa

There are many international powers that are wrangling over the spread of their influence in the Horn of Africa and therefore possess, or actively seek to possess, military bases in the Horn of Africa to protect their commercial and political interests; mainly:

**United States of America:** The USA owns the most important and largest military bases in the Horn of Africa region. It is stationed in Djibouti, where there are more than four thousand military personnel and civilians, and was established by Washington after the 9/11 attacks. The USA also has several secret military bases in the Horn of Africa. The USA has owns the naval bases of Mombasa and Nablok in Kenya, and the Arba Minch air base for unmanned aircraft since 2011 in Ethiopia, which has a mission of reconnaissance and espionage in East Africa. However, the US base in Djibouti is the only one declared by Washington, and the survival of this US base has been extended to 2025, at a cost of about US\$60 million per annum.

**France:** France has occupied Djibouti since 1850 and still maintains its oldest military base there; i.e. the “Force Francis Djibouti” base near the “Duda” road branching from the “Ambouli” Airport street, where about 900 soldiers are stationed, in exchange for a lease worth US\$34 million annually. Despite the independence of Djibouti, France still controls this base, which







is the most important French military base in Africa, and whose tasks are focused on: securing the movement of trade through Bab al-Mandab Strait, and protecting Djibouti from any external or internal aggression, such as eliminating the rebellion previously occurred in the 2001.

**China:** Its first military base abroad was established in Djibouti in 2016, in a location that occupies a great strategic position, to refuel the naval ships participating in peacekeeping and humanitarian missions, especially off the coasts of Yemen and Somalia. The agreement to establish the base guarantees its military presence until 2026, with a military force of up to 10,000 soldiers. Among the most important tasks of the base are monitoring, peacekeeping, humanitarian aid in Africa and West Asia, military cooperation and joint exercises, evacuation and protection of overseas Chinese nationals, emergency rescue operations and securing strategic sea lanes.

**Japan:** Its relationship with Djibouti dates back to the 1970s. However it was not present militarily in Djibouti until 2009, through the establishment of a naval military base to participate in confronting the piracy of ships by Somalis. The base contains a permanent port and an airport for the take-off and landing of Japanese reconnaissance planes, and houses 600 military personnel, while its annual lease amounts to US\$30 million.

**European Union:** The joint task force formed by the European Union, known as the European Anti-Piracy Operation (Atalanta), is stationed in Djibouti, with the participation of eight countries: Germany, Belgium, Spain, France, Greece, the Netherlands, Britain, Sweden, with the aim of stopping off pirate crimes in Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and navigation control.

## The Military Conflict of Regional Powers in the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa is also witnessing a struggle between the largest regional countries to extend their influence in this strategic region, and thus have military bases in their countries. The most important of these countries are:

**UAE:** UAE dismantled its military base built in 2015 in Eritrea, known as the Assab base, from December 28, 2020 to March 2, 2021. It used the facility as a base for transferring Sudanese forces and heavy weapons to Yemen during its fight alongside the coalition forces against Iran-backed Houthis. It also transferred its military facilities and mechanisms to the Yemeni Island of Mayon, and to the Egyptian military base of Sidi Barani, which is located close to the border with Libya. UAE also built an airstrip on Mayon Island with a length of 1,800 meters, and transported drones from the Eritrean port of Assab to the Yemeni Island.

**The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:** declared its intention to establish a military base in Djibouti in light of its efforts to play a greater role in the security of the region, as it senses danger from the Iranian presence and penetration in the region.

**Turkey:** Turkey sought to strengthen its presence across Somalia, as it intensified its economic and humanitarian intervention, and strengthened its presence in 2017, by establishing its largest military base outside its borders south of the capital, Mogadishu, to train ten thousand Somali government soldiers. It also obtained the concession to develop the Sudanese island of Suakin on the Red Sea, which will enhance the Turkish presence and influence in the Horn of Africa, and helps marketing of Turkish military industries in the region.

**Israel:** Israel rented the Dahlak Archipelago in Eritrea to build its largest military base. It also established a naval base in the port of Massawa and an intelligence base located on the top of a mountain at an altitude of 3000 meters above sea level. Israel utilises the island as its monitoring and control center in the Red Sea to monitor Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Sudan and





the movement of oil tankers. The base is also a station for operating Israeli submarines equipped with nuclear missiles, which monitor navigation at Bab al-Mandab Strait in the south of the Red Sea.

**Iran:** Iran seeks to control Bab al-Mandab Strait alongside its control over part of the Strait of Hormuz, which opens the way for it to control two of the most important straits in the world, Bab al-Mandab and Hormuz. This would help it to have an effective presence in the Red Sea waters to besiege Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. There are doubts that Iran succeeded in establishing a military base in the port of Assab in Eritrea, but the Eritrean authorities denied the existence of an Iranian military bases on its territory. There are also Iranian military forces in the region, the 41st Marine Group of the Iranian army, which consists of the logistic frigate “Lavan”, Martyr Admiral Naqdi Destroyer, and the ship “Tenab” for logistical support. Also, from time to time there are three Iranian Kilo-class submarines.

## Conclusions

The international competition for seaports in the Horn of Africa has some implications, which include the nature of the relationship between the ports and, as competition escalates between them, as is the case between the ports of Djibouti and Somalia, with the aim of winning the title of the largest port in Africa and turning into important logistic points for transport, trade and connecting with the outside world, the ports of Djibouti and the Somali Berbera port on the Red Sea compete in terms of Ethiopia's foreign trade.

The development of the port of Berbera in Somaliland would end the monopoly of the port of Djibouti in the region, as it is estimated that with the completion of the development of the port of Berbera with Emirati and British funding, the port of Djibouti's share of Ethiopian goods will be reduced to 30%, and Berbera will become a regional center for trade and transport in the Horn of Africa. It is likely that it will be a destination for a US military base in light of the fears of the growing Chinese influence in Djibouti. Hence, this competition seems positive in light of the ability to attract more foreign investments, and the flow of foreign funds that it entails will stimulate the economies of the region.

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It can be confirmed that the rush towards seaports in the region has generated a state of intense competition between regional and international powers. This has not yet amounted to conflict or confrontational relations, which was exemplified in the Chinese-American competition. Especially after Beijing established a military base in Djibouti and its growing maritime influence at the Red Sea. In addition to Russian moves to build naval influence in the Red Sea, a matter that raised American and Western concerns. There were also some Turkish-Qatari attempts to control some Somali ports, in an attempt to undermine or crowd out other Arab roles in the region.

Although some may view this competition as a negative factor affecting the security and stability of the Horn of Africa, especially in the case of using seaports for military purposes, it may represent a positive situation as well by allowing the Horn of Africa countries to benefit from the renewed international interest in the region. Especially at the economic level represented in increasing investments, enhancing trade activity, improving logistic infrastructure, and concluding proper deals regarding renting military bases. Thus, reviving the economic movement of the countries in the region.

From a strategic point of view, the presence of military bases would add a kind of security stability to the host countries such as Djibouti, as well as present a positive image to the leaders of the region regarding their relations with international powers and the most powerful armies in the world. There are some countries; e.g. Eritrea, that can take advantage of the international interest in its ports to achieve openness to the international community, and to enhance its presence regionally and internationally after years of international sanctions. Meanwhile, Somaliland can also take advantage of this opportunity to expand the circle of its international relations in an effort to be recognized by the international community.

In the perspective of regional integration, seaports have become a basis for regional partnerships in the Horn of Africa, and it is clear that Ethiopia has a strategic interest in accessing all the ports in the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean within the framework of a major strategy on which the Abi Ahmed Regional Project is based, which ensures the economic progress of Addis Ababa, and overcoming the political geography that made it a landlocked country. This has strengthened the Ethiopian endeavors to own stakes in the region's ports such as Doraleh in Djibouti and Berbera in Somaliland, and it is also strongly involved in some integrative regional projects.

The biggest loser from all this fallout, competition and control over the countries of the region is the Arab countries in both the African and Asian sides. Countries such as the USA, Iran and Israel do not hide their ambitions in the countries of the region, through their siege and penetration within the framework of their national security spaces represented in the Red Sea across the Horn of Africa. However, the volume of Arab interest, cooperation and presence in the region does not rise to the level of challenge. Countries such as Egypt and Sudan have little presence at the economic level and participate in peacekeeping forces, and the size of the Saudi presence is still weak despite attempts to activate it. Meanwhile, many doubts are raised about the presence of the UAE for its attempt to control and extend its influence over the countries of the region.

It is clear from the positions of the Arab countries towards the Horn of Africa that they do not care much about it except when they are confronted by a crisis, as happened in the current war between the Arab coalition forces and the Houthis, or in the issue between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia regarding the Renaissance Dam, while this region remained neglected and forgotten for years despite its paramount importance for Arab and Gulf security.



## Summary

The Horn of Africa is witnessing a state of a power race in regards to seaports. Meanwhile, Djibouti continues its efforts to gain more regional weight as a major center for trade and security, as it has faced only a slim regional competition through recent years in light of Eritrea's closure to the outside world due to international sanctions, and Somalia's security issues from the of the threats of the Mujahideen Youth Movement. In addition to the piracy operations against its coasts. However, there is a new state of competition over strategic ports; that is clearly evident in light of the growing interest in Berbera port in Somaliland, which may turn into a logistic gateway to East Africa.

With this struggle, international competition and the military build-up of many countries of the world in the region and nearby areas. All of this forebodes the occurrence of a future conflict in this region and neighboring regions, which will have the greatest impact on these countries whose dilapidated economy will not stand such conflicts.



## About b'huth

b'huth is an independent public policy research Centre founded in Dubai, UAE in 2002, that focuses on International Affairs, Geostrategic Affairs, Public Policy Studies and Public Opinion Research. We bring together experts in all these areas to work with us, to learn from one another and to foster creative thinking. Our scholars & Analysts develop practical policy recommendations and offer them to policymakers and stakeholders for political and social improvement as we strive to always bring forward «actionable knowledge». Quite often, b'huth is involved in implementing this recommendation.

b'huth believes in knowledge sharing for the advancement of our societies, both in the Arab Region and globally, and we aim in our public policy analysis and recommendations to help expand opportunities for all people and strengthen the effectiveness of public policy.



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