

THE GULF STATES IN SUBSAHARAN AFRICA: 'Lilliputians' Conundrum or Power Competitors?



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Abstract:

Not long ago, the Gulf kingdoms lived, somehow, on the margin of history. However, they have quickly emerged from remote and desolate desert spots into powerful States competing with other major actors for global status and influence in Africa, especially in the eastern swathes of this continent.

As newcomers to Africa or being 'late to the party,' the Gulf States, emulating other foreign powers, have deployed a strategy to participate in the scramble over the African continent through increasing direct investments, access to raw material sources, mediating in conflicts, and providing arms to war-torn entities or to those fighting terrorism and maritime piracy. They did not fail to meddle in the domestic affairs of some African countries to get a footprint, for instance, in Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, and Libya, enhance their influence, and attempt to shove the presence and the strategic assets of certain major world powers still encroached in some regions, notably the Horn of Africa and the Sahel-Sahara.

The Gulf States have not initiated their intrusion in Africa as a unified group, embodied in their regional gathering, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), but rather on an individual basis, emphasizing contradictory interests, a stark political rivalry, and fierce economic competition, driven by security concerns and geostrategic considerations.

The article attempts to thoroughly scrutinize and comprehend the meaning of the existing dichotomy between intrinsic capabilities and declared ambitions to play a significant role in African politics across various domains. It may not be far-fetched to argue, however, that these States have come a long way from tiny communities, tumbling tribes, and Bedouin spirit to become resilient political entities, modernized States, staunch economic competitors, and influential actors not only in the Middle East but also in Africa. Such empowerment became tangible, thanks to tremendous oil wealth, rational governance, and subtle alliances with some major powers of the Western Hemisphere.

Moreover, this study does not consist of a mere assessment to tout the startling success of the Gulf States in Africa, but it also constitutes a questioning of their abilities to sustain their conflicting ambitions and compete with other prominent powers in this region.

Keywords: The Gulf States, Africa, economic cooperation, foreign meddling, regional balance of power.

Introduction:

This study delves into the strategies pursued by the Gulf States in Sub-Sahara Africa. It focuses mainly on the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. The other kingdoms, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman, lack the financial capabilities, ambitions for regional leadership, and desire to participate in the scramble over Africa.

A western historian once argued, "The Gulf is a gulf in the writing of world history. So much of the world's history has unfolded in the Gulf or through it. Paradoxically, while there is much world history in the Gulf, there is not so much of the Gulf in world history" (Fromherz, 2018). This historic grasp of the posture of the Gulf may confirm the postulate that conceives this region as Lilliputian, not only because of its geographic tightness, but also because of its allegedly insignificant contribution to world history. The term 'Lilliputian' comes from Jonathan Swift's 1726 novel, *Gulliver's Travels*, and Lilliput is the name of a fictional island whose people, the Lilliputians, stand only about six inches high (Vocabulary.com). It may describe anything that is exceptionally small or trivial and something characterized by pettiness, or prone to political manoeuvring.

However, the assumption that the Gulf played a marginal role in world history does not withstand historical evidence, which attests that the Gulf region was the cradle of ancient civilizations, religions, and the birthplace of Islam, which spread to many parts of the world, including large swathes of the African continent. In modern times, Saudi tribes participated in the British-backed pan-Arab revolt led by Hussein Bin Ali, the Sharif of Mecca, against the Ottoman rule in 1916, aiming to establish a unified Arab state. The Allied victory in the First World War signalled the end of Ottoman suzerainty and control over the Arabian Peninsula, but paved the way for the expansion of Western influence over the entire Middle East. The literature related to the foreign policies of the Gulf States is quiet vast, though relatively recent. Before dwelling briefly on the nature and the motivations of these policies, it seems necessary to recall the theoretical trends and contents of the primary schools of thought attempting to explain the external behaviour of States in general terms.

The realist school argues that the relative material power and security drive primarily the scope and ambition of the foreign policy of a country. However, the influence of power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex due to the impact of variables other than mere material capabilities, such as sociological, cultural, and cognitive parameters. The external behaviour of states may also relate to systemic pressures mediated by the perceptions of decision-makers (Pericoli, 2025). The foreign policy decisions rely on options and choices, as developed by the rational model incepted by the pioneers of the Decision-making approach, Richard Snyder, Bruck, H.W. and Burton Sapin (1962), as well as on the outputs generated by competing bureaucracies, as conceptualized in the seminal book, the 'essence decision' of published by Graham Allison (1971).

Attenuating the assumptions of the Realist thought in understanding the motivations of the States in their interactions with the world scene, recent developments in International Relations have focused, instead, on the relevance of soft power as formulated by Joseph Nye (2004) and on the political units as put forward by Alexander Wendt (1999) and Nicholas Onuf (1998). Soft measures, such as human assistance, diplomatic charity, cultural and religious influence,

mediation, and brokerage, have become the preferred instruments used by the Gulf States in their policies towards Africa.

Pericoli rightly pointed out that the literature concerning the Gulf States' foreign aid, for instance, has evolved over time, shifting from a focus on pure realism to incorporating constructivism and Neo-Classical Realism (NCR). Pericoli went on dwelling on the application of these International relations theories on the Gulf cases, asserting that a rationalist perspective considers foreign aid as one of the Gulf States' leverage in dealing with Africa, as an instrument to achieve diplomatic and economic objectives. Instead, constructive lenses conceive foreign assistance as driven by religious factors (Pericoli, 2025).

This focus on religious and cultural dimensions was particularly evident in Saudi Arabia's policy towards Africa before the reforms incepted by the Crown Prince Bin Salman in recent years, to curtail the ostentatious public expressions of Wahabism, a rigorist orthodox interpretation of Islam and prone an 'Islam of the happy medium'(*wasatiya*). In contrast, Qatar's support to religion-lenient regimes in the Arab world and Africa expressed, rather, Doha's political response to Saudi and Emirati support to military-backed regimes in these two regions. Therefore, ideological pedigrees of foreign policy does not reflect realities, which refer, rather, to a pragmatic search for material empowerment (economic capabilities and world status). These objectives seem to be the precise motivations of Qatar. According to this set of power concerns, Qatar's foreign policy during the 2017 Gulf crisis was interpreted within the framework of NCR, as it explains how Qatar, despite its small territory and tiny population, succeeded in mitigating the effects of this crisis (Al-Eshaq & Rasheed, 2022).

To comprehend the foreign policy of Gulf States, Shahbaz and Hassaniyan suggested to use NCR because this approach bridges the gap between neorealism and classical realism and because it posits that domestic elements (state leadership, national identity, domestic politics), added to the international system and power distribution among nations, are equally important in influencing foreign policy (Shahbaz & Hassaniyan, 2025).

The regional balance of power, global trends in geo-economics, and the influence of foreign powers all affect the external behaviour of the Gulf States. This equation found a good justification in events threatening Gulf regional security, such as the crisis in Yemen, Iran's ambitions, and the profound instability in East Africa, a region closely linked to the MENA region due to geographic proximity, historical, religious, and cultural links, intermixing of people, and trade exchanges.

As the present study concerns the interconnections between two regions-the Gulf and Africa-within national and global-level frameworks of analysis, particularly when security issues are determinative, the concept of security complexes appears opportune to consider. "While the theory of regional (and sub-regional) security complexes engaged with issues of security, rather than with foreign policy, as the primary unit of analysis, the concept holds considerable value to the study of foreign policy dynamics and interaction of the states," according to Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, the leading theorists of the Copenhagen School (Ulrichsen, 2024).

The interconnections between the Gulf and eastern Africa are determinant for their political stability, economic progress, and future evolution. However, these two regions are currently poorly structured; and consist of heterogeneous subsystems due to power rivalries, security threats, political instability, the scramble for natural resources, and interference from prominent world actors. The Gulf region comprising the GCC and Iran, may no longer be susceptible to create and structure regional security complexes of "geographically coherent patterns of security interdependence," as Buzan and Weaver observed when writing in 2003, based on "durable patterns of amity and enmity" based in part on "history, politics, and material conditions" (Buzan, Weaver 2003).

Although beyond the scope of this study, idiosyncratic factors, personality traits, and cognitive perceptions, as formulated by James Rosenau (1980), also seem important to explain the overall foreign policies of the Gulf States, because of the nature of the regimes of these countries based on the autocratic rule of the Emirs and their dynastic families. Such a structure leaves little say to local institutions, political parties, and public opinion (if any) in the national decision-making. Drawing from the concept of sub-imperialism suggested by the Brazilian Marxist militant Rui Mauro Marini, Sudanese political analyst Mahjoub Husam presented a debatable study that portrays the United Arab Emirates as a sub-imperialist contractor in Africa, working in the interests of Western powers. He argued, "Sub-imperialism refers to a phenomenon where a country, while not being a major global imperial power, acts in ways that align with or support the interests of imperial powers and behaves in an imperialist manner within its own region. It is characterised by actions that extend a nation's political, economic, and military influence over other nations or regions, often on behalf of, or in collaboration with, dominant global powers"(Mahjoub, 2025).

The UAE's regional strategy appears driven by ambitions of economic hegemony, political expansion, and security considerations, as well as a focus on acquiring port concessions to dominate global trade routes around Africa, securing land, and gaining access to African mining and renewable energy resources. In addition, they intervened militarily in African-torn conflicts to expand their influence. In doing so, the UAE is not harming the interests of Western powers in Africa, but rather seems to act as subcontractors for these countries. However, such a subsidiary role does not amount to dubbing the UAE a sub-imperialist power, for the simple reason that Imperialism is the extension of national capitalism and an entrepreneurial dominant class in search of shares in global markets for their ever-increasing manufactured goods and industrial products. This does not seem to be the case in the UAE, since this country lacks the ingredients of a capitalist power in terms of economic and material outputs. In fact, this country utilizes raw materials and exploits African land for its local consumption needs, and is not yet in the phase of exporting manufactured goods, industrial equipment, or locally made arms. Despite energy wealth, intrusion into innovative technologies, and diversification of its economy, the UAE remains an emergent power, but not an imperialist power, if we take into account the definition provided by the Marxist theorist Vladimir Lenin. In his work, Lenin depicted Imperialism as the "last stage of capitalism" and as the extension of enlarged production of capital and the formation of an oligopoly through the interlacing of banks and industrial capital. (Lenin 1916).

The Gulf States are no longer playing in the courtyard of small States or small powers, as framed in the theoretical layout put forward by Peter Barston (1973), or William Peterson (1962). In terms of power capabilities, these States may find their place in the range of intermediary powers. They surpass, by large, countries depicted as weak States, or not well endowed with power measurements compared to others, because of the uneven distribution of power in the world (Vital 1967) or because of the incapacity of weak States to play a decisive role in world politics, being 'the mice that do not roar' (Dominguez 1971). The case of the foreign policy of small territories (Burton 1967) seems no longer potent in the case of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the age of technology, financial assets and soft power diplomacy.

To have an overall picture of the power ingredients the Gulf States enjoy, it may be opportune to recall some indicators to weigh their importance in the global balance of power.

Map: The Gulf States' Broad Geographic Settings



Source: <https://www.dreamstime.com/stock-photo-indian-ocean-image3196330>.

The map indicates that this region has sea outlets through the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most important oil transit routes. It also has maritime links with North and East African countries, which are adjacent to Saudi Arabia through the Red Sea, and with the Indian Ocean and Southeast Africa through the Gulf of Aden. Therefore, the Gulf States are geographically close to Africa, a proximity that has contributed to the development of deeply rooted trade, cultural exchanges, and religious links between the two regions (Abu Hatab et al., 2024).

These multifaceted connections are particularly significant in the longstanding relationship between the Gulf region and both the North and the Horn of Africa, through the expansion of Islam and the Arabic language, which contributed to forging shared identity values and cultural commonalities.

Except for Saudi Arabia, whose nation-state emerged with the rise of the Al Saud dynasty in central Arabia in 1727 and with the establishment of its modern kingdom in 1932, the other two Gulf States have a relatively short history in modern times. Indeed, they have come a long way since their formation in 1971. The United Arab Emirates, comprising seven emirates since 1972, emerged as a federation following the end of the treaties regulating the British protectorate. Like the UAE, Qatar gained its independence after a period of protectorate rule that lasted from 1916 to 1971.

Despite the discovery of oil in the late 1930s, the Gulf States remained predominantly tribal communities, living primarily from trade and pastoral activities, until the 1970s, when rapid economic growth occurred due to the booming oil sector and the strategic value of petroleum in the global energy market. Some liberal reforms enhanced the modernisation of the Gulf societies, although the political nature of the regimes remained hereditary and autocratic, perpetuating the rule of the royal families.

The high geopolitical potential and abundant natural resources, encompassing two-thirds of the world's proven oil reserves and one-third of its natural gas resources, have transformed the Gulf region and the Arabian Peninsula into significant economic hubs and influential powers in the Middle East and Africa.

Table: Gulf States: Selected Aggregates 2023

Countries	Population (millions)	Surface (Sq. /k)	GDP (\$ billion)	Oil Reserves (World Ranking)	Oil Exports (World Ranking)	Foreign Currency (\$billion)
Saudi Arabia	37.473	2.1496.902	2.697	2	1	452.8
UAE	11.027	83.600	545	7	5	207.1
QATAR	2.444	11.586	221	13	17	42.4

Source: Various statistics (World Bank, Statista, World Metrics, World Population Review-2024).

The Gulf States share some similarities, as their territories are mostly arid deserts but have coastal bands. They also bear highly marked contrasts. Saudi Arabia encompasses the most extensive territory with more than two million sq km, and the largest population with nearly 40 million inhabitants.

These kingdoms enjoy substantial hydrocarbon resources. As of 2024, Saudi Arabia has the second-largest proven oil reserves in the world after Venezuela, with 267 billion barrels. It was

the second-largest oil-producing country in the world, with an output of around 10.9 billion barrels per day, a level similar to Russia's (World Population Review, 2025). Qatar boasts the third-largest proven natural gas reserves in the world, estimated at 25.6 trillion c/f, and constitutes the largest exporter of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) worldwide (Statista, 2025).

The Gulf States have markedly different GDPs. Saudi Arabia is the most prosperous kingdom, with a GDP of slightly more than \$2.6 trillion, well ahead of the United Arab Emirates (\$545.1 billion) and Qatar (\$221.4 billion). Saudi Arabia holds the largest share of foreign currency reserves (\$452.8 billion). Furthermore, the total value of the assets under the management of Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund reached \$913 billion by the end of 2024 (Arab News, 2025). Qatar Investment Authority's Fund totalled \$557 billion in 2024 (SWFI 2024), while the UAE's *Mubadala* emerged as the top investor among sovereign wealth funds (SWFs) globally in 2024, investing \$29.2 billion (Khaleej Times, 2025).

The Gulf States have progressively diversified their economies, investing in sectors as diverse as services, real estate, innovative technologies, sports, and leisure, while relying on their oil and gas riches. Qatar hosted the prestigious Football World Cup Final in 2022, and Saudi Arabia completed the mega entertainment project located at Qiddiya City, which aims for global prominence. Riyadh will also host the FIFA World Cup Final in 2032.

Such gigantic infrastructures and natural resources form the foundation of the Gulf States' global ambitions, explaining their involvement in the new scramble for Africa, driven by security and geostrategic considerations, as well as a desire for prestige and influence.

This study analyses the motivations and practices implemented by the Gulf States in Africa, based on the assumption that the driving factors consist of geostrategic design and security considerations, articulated around competition and rivalries.

The study comprises two main parties. One relates to analysing the geostrategic and security designs of the Gulf States and assessing the achievements of these countries in terms of economic, military, religious, and cultural cooperation with Sub-Saharan countries, mainly in eastern Africa. The second pertains to explaining the opportunities offered by Africa to the Gulf States as well as the related challenges. It also delves into the constraints faced by these countries in their approach to the African continent.

The Spearheads of the Gulf States' Engagement in Africa

The involvement of the Gulf States in Africa proved multifaceted, encompassing a range of geostrategic and security concerns, economic interests, military cooperation, diplomatic brokerage, mediation, and meddling in the domestic affairs of many African countries.

Strategic and security designs

The Gulf States' international posture is primarily shaped by their strategic location, which renders them vulnerable to political upheavals and economic turbulence. Historically, the Red Sea facilitated the trade of goods and the movement of people between the East African kingdoms and the Gulf States, fostering cultural ties, spreading Islam, and shaping a shared

identity. This longstanding historical bond continues to influence the Gulf States' foreign policies in Africa, particularly in the eastern parts of the continent, where the strategic importance of the Horn of Africa, as a gateway to the Indian Ocean and beyond, has become highly important in the perceptions of the Gulf rulers (Abu Hatab, 2024).

The East African region became a hotbed of tensions, civil wars, terrorism, and religious extremism. Violent conflicts occurred between Eritrea and Ethiopia, Somalia witnessed a fragmentation with the self-proclaimed independent State of Somaliland, Ethiopia faced a rebel movement in Tigre, Sudan split into two distinct entities, and faced a dissent movement in Darfur. In addition, serious tensions have arisen between Ethiopia and Egypt over the control of Nile waters. A civil war erupted in Sudan after a military coup against Omar Al Bashir in 2019, and Mozambique is fighting an Islamist secessionist movement in Cabo Delgado.

The region became the sanctuary of terrorism resulting from the consequences generated by the so-called Arab Spring revolutions, which swept autocratic regimes and paved the way to radical-inspired insurgencies and jihadist organisations under the impulse of the Middle East-based Al-Qaeda and affiliated groups. A terrorist group known as Al-Shabab has spread over the Horn of Africa, committing a deadly attack on a Kenyan University, killing at least 147 people in April 2015, assassinating Somali peace activists, international aid workers, journalists, and blocking the delivery of foreign relief aid during the 2011 famine that killed tens of thousands of Somalis.

Western media reported that Al-Shabab groups have entertained strong ties with Al-Qaeda and sealed an alliance with the Houthis. This political and military organisation emerged in the 1990s from the Zaidiyyah tribe, a Shia Islamic branch located in the northern provinces of Yemen. Other assumptions also argued that Al-Shabab worked together with the Houthis to smuggle weapons and conduct other illicit activities, from money laundering to disrupting international shipments (Hassan, Mamdouh, 2024).

Moreover, the conflict in Yemen is widely perceived as a front of the Saudi-Iran proxy war, because of the supposed ideological ingredients of the Houthis inspired by Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia movement.

Against this volatile background, the Gulf States came to regard the north and eastern parts of Africa as possible threats to their national security because the terrorist organisations emerging in these two regions have expressed a hostile stance to the kingdoms, seen as staunch allies of the Western world. Saudi Arabia led a coalition of nine countries from West Asia and North Africa against the Houthis in Yemen in March 2015. The UAE declared its opposition to these Islamist radical organisations, while Qatar moved to support Islamist lenient regimes, not because of religious or ideological affinities but mainly because of Doha's rivalry with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. These contrasting stances led Saudi Arabia and the UAE (as well as Bahrain and Egypt) to cut off all diplomatic ties with Qatar in early June 2017 and exert a land, air, and sea blockade over this country, accused of supporting terrorists and extremist Islamic groups in the Arab world and Africa.

The Gulf States may also fear the intrusion into their territories of massive illegal migrations, including terrorists disguised as refugees that might result from increasing instability in Eastern African countries, in particular. Uncontrolled migration may pose a significant threat to the social cohesion of the Gulf States, particularly the less populated UAE and Qatar.

Strategic and security concerns became embedded in the broader foreign policy objectives and economic transformation of the Gulf States as outlined in Saudi Arabia's 'Vision 2030' (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), Qatar's 'National Vision 2030' (Qatar National Vision), and Abu Dhabi's 'We the UAE 2031' (wetheuae). These projects aimed to diversify their alliances and strategic partnerships, reduce their reliance on traditional Western powers, and stand as emerging players in the international arena. In this grand design, Africa (the Horn and the Red Sea regions in particular) represents a focus for the Gulf States because of its strategic assets, vast natural resources, its growing empowerment, and its importance in the world balance of power and competition among internationally influential actors. Thus, the stability in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea proved vital to the Gulf States, as the maritime routes of these two regions link Asia, Europe, and Africa through the Suez Canal.

There was no surprise when Saudi Arabia succeeded in launching the Council of Arab and African Coastal States on the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden to safeguard the economic and commercial lifelines in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea from threats like piracy, smuggling, and conflicts (Alade, 2025).

Examining the growing influence of the Emirates and Saudi Arabia in Sudanese politics is essential to understanding the causes of the ongoing war. With regard to geostrategic and security designs, Sudan constitutes the focal concern of the Gulf States because of its sensitive geographic location, situated between the Sahel and the Red Sea, political weight in eastern Africa, its high political instability, and the involvement of foreign powers in the conflicts that have torn this country apart for decades. Sudan has become the focus of rivalries and competitions between the Gulf States, which have provided military support to warring factions, driven by divergent interests and ambitions. The Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis in Yemen benefited from 40.000 soldiers made available by Khartoum, a gesture highly appreciated by Riyadh in its ideological conflict and rivalry over the leadership in the Middle East.

The UAE had different concerns, being more worried over the spread of protests and the need to strengthen security ties with Sudan, given this country's proximity to Egypt and the regime's links to the Muslim Brotherhood. However, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE were wary of the increasing rapprochement between the Omar El Bashir regime and Qatar and Turkey, which may strengthen a pro-Islamist bloc in the region (Donelli 2025).

Despite their opposition to Qatar's influence in Sudan and the meddling of other external powers in the domestic affairs of this country, such as Turkey, Chad, Libya, and Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported different warring factions. Riyadh, in conjunction with Egypt, maintained close ties with Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the military leader who emerged from the coup against President Omar al-Bashir in 2019 and commander of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). Abu Dhabi aligned itself with Gen Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, better known as 'Hemedti,' the head of the Rapid Security Forces (RSF), once the ally of Burhan, before leading,

since April 2023, a rebellion against the central authorities in North Darfur. RSF not only succeeded in taking control of Sudan's gold mines and allegedly smuggling the metal to the UAE but also managed to intervene in conflicts in Libya and Yemen (Hassan, Mamdouh 2024).

As the situation in Sudan deteriorated rapidly, leading to a war that is still going on, the UAE emerged as an important mediator between the Sudanese rival factions, thanks to its network of connections in the East African region and Russia. However, the task of Abu Dhabi proved challenging to achieve because it faced the competition of Qatar, which rallied the Turkish-Egyptian axis, especially after the increasing rift between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Renaissance Dam.

The Gulf States found themselves entangled in a security imbroglio, with the global attention shifting to the Gulf of Aden and the East African region because of the threats to the maritime routes posed by the Houthis and the drone attacks they launched on the Zionist entity after the start of the October 2024 war. The Gulf States are attempting to fill the security vacuum left by France and the United States following the emergence of regimes that denounce Western presence in Africa. In addition, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are tempted to counter Iran's growing influence in West Africa from Senegal to Nigeria by using the networks of their ally, Hezbollah, in opposition to the meddling activities of the Zionist entity over large swathes spanning from the Atlantic shores of Africa to Uganda. The Saudi-Emirati coalition in Yemen also relies on Dagalo's RSF forces with the support of Russian groups to fight the Houthis (Hassan, Mamdouh 2024).

The Gulf States are participating in 'the surrounding' of the African continent, especially the UAE, which has expanded its economic footprint across Africa through investments in ports, airports, dry ports, and container hubs. These logistical infrastructures not only facilitate land acquisition and resource extraction across Africa but also serve the UAE's political ambitions and military empowerment. Emirati policies aimed also at countering perceived security threats from Iran (Mahjoub, 2025). Saudi Arabia also attempted to expand its influence in the region, while relying on Washington for defense protection and aligning closely with the US economy.

Economic stakes and military cooperation

The Gulf States utilized economic spearheads to implement their strategic and security grand designs, in line with their projected visions for the 2030-2031 horizon. In economic terms, the objective is to reduce their dependence on the hydrocarbon sector and invest primarily in domains perceived as strategic, such as renewable energy, infrastructure, logistics, agriculture, mining, and technology. Africa remains their privileged target, as the continent offers valuable opportunities due to its vast and largely untapped raw materials, important market outlets, and vibrant youth. In the military domain, the Gulf States aim to strengthen their cooperation with African countries, particularly those located in the eastern part of the continent, to secure the political stability of their regimes and the integrity of their national territories.

-On the economic level:

The Gulf States Cooperation Council (GCC) has invested collectively in Africa more than \$110 billion between 2019 and 2023. They poured around \$113 billion into this continent in 2022-3, outpacing their total investments during the previous decade (Alade, 2025). The UAE has invested \$59.4 billion. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have pledged \$25.6 billion and \$7.2 billion, respectively, during the 2010s (Munyati, 2024). During this period, the UAE has been the fourth-largest foreign direct investor in Africa, after China, the EU, and the United States. In 2022-4 alone, the UAE has pledged \$97 billion in new investments in Africa, which is three times more than China's commitments (Mahjoub, 2025). These investments were timely and much needed by African countries, mainly as FDI flows to Africa declined to \$45 billion in 2022 from the record \$80 billion set in 2021, according to UNCTAD's World Investment Report (Munyati, 2024).

The Gulf States' investments in key sectors, regarded as vital for their national security and crucial for economic diversification, such as renewable energies, are important because fossil fuels are not perpetual, and green value chains hold significant value. Thus, they invested in Africa's mining and critical minerals, such as cobalt, lithium, copper, platinum, and gold, which is the UAE's top import product from Africa. The Emirati International Company Holding invested billions of dollars in African mining operations, including a significant stake in Zambia's Mopani copper mines (Alade, 2025). The Gulf States have committed substantial funds to Africa's renewable energy sources, including solar, wind, and hydroelectric potential, to facilitate an energy transition and secure a share in the global market for new technologies, particularly those linked to the electric car industry and related devices. The UAE, for instance, did not fail to express its ambition to become a global leader in the energy transition, as shown during the COP 28 climate conference held in Dubai in November-December 2023.

Saudi Arabia has pledged \$2.5 billion for African renewable energy projects. It planned to invest \$15 15billion in global mining stakes in Namibia, Guinea, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Baskaran, 2023). Qatar has expanded investments since 2021 in the energy sectors of Zambia and South Africa. Emirati Company Masdar pledged to invest \$2 billion in renewable energy projects in Africa by 2030, and the Saudi company ACWA Power's investments in Africa reported in October 2024 to have disbursed \$7 billion (Alade, 2025). The Saudi government granted \$41 41billion to finance start-ups, provide import-export credit, and spur private sector growth in Africa over the next 10 years. In 2022, Qatar pledged a \$200m donation for climate adaptation projects in African countries vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (Procopio, Cok 2025).

The Gulf States also favoured investments in land and agriculture to secure food sufficiency for their populations, as they were importing most of their agricultural products (80-90%) due to the arid desert landscape. They found enormous difficulties in securing food supplies during the 2008-2010 food price crisis, when these countries faced severe fluctuations in food prices. They were also subject to the incidences of the Russian-Ukrainian war, which generated large-scale food shortages, especially wheat and fertilisers, as well as a spiral of the prices of consumer products. These investments include purchasing agricultural land, increasing food production, improving infrastructure, and establishing processing and logistical services for

local consumption and export to the Gulf region, with a particular emphasis on staple crop and livestock production (Alade, 2025).

The progress in technology and digital transformation in Africa has attracted the interest of the Gulf States. The Saudi Tech Fund allocated \$200 million in 2023 to support African fintech start-ups in vibrant tech hubs like Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa. Gulf financial institutions and sovereign wealth funds are channelling capital into African start-ups, fintech initiatives, and emerging industries, such as Qatar's investment in Airtel Mobile Commerce, the mobile money division of Airtel Africa (Alade, 2025). Gulf companies, such as the UAE's Etisalat and Qatar's Ooredoo, have invested in Africa's digital infrastructure, enhancing connectivity and supporting growing digital economies of the African continent.

One sector considered essential to the Gulf States' strategies in Africa is the acquisition of ports and naval facilities, which aims to establish a footprint in the African landscape due to geographic proximity and strategic reasons. In addition, these countries attempted to secure the maritime routes over the Gulf of Aden to get access to Africa's natural resources and reinforce their position as vital logistical and commercial gateways between Africa, Asia, and Europe. Amid competition over Africa's port installations and facilities, Dubai Ports World (DPW), an Emirati leader in port expansion and maritime collaborations, is managing projects in over 10 African countries. Qatar prefers, instead, to invest in purchasing assets in airports and air transportation. As its national airline, Qatar Airways has acquired stakes in several African airlines, including the purchase of shares in Rwandan Airlines, valued at \$1.3 billion (Reuters, 2024). It also acquired stakes in the Bugesera International Airport and participated in upgrading and operating part of Tanzania's Dar es Salaam port (Munyati, 2024). Saudi Arabia announced plans to scale up its investments in Africa to more than \$25 billion in July 2025 by 2030, as part of a broader strategy to strengthen economic relations with Africa (Asharq Al Awsat 2025).

-On the military level

Similar to the economic stakes, military cooperation proved an important tool for the Gulf States. Acting, whether individually or participating in regional stability initiatives, they seemed committed to ensuring not only their national security but also the political stability of the eastern African region and beyond. They were prone to secure strategic maritime routes, particularly around the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, through the installation of ports in the Horn of Africa and military posts in Eritrea and Somaliland, as an extension of their efforts to protect shipping lanes and enhance control over key sea routes.

The Gulf States have oriented their military cooperation with African countries, where they have heavily invested in renewable energy, mining, agriculture, and telecommunications as well as selling arms to those facing wars. In this practice, the link between geostrategic and security designs, on the one hand, and the search for economic empowerment and world status, on the other, is clearly ascertained.

The Gulf military cooperation with African countries took various forms, ranging from training African troops, setting up military bases, exporting arms to intervening militarily in

African conflict-torn countries, or participating in fighting terrorist groups, especially those that have connections with the Middle East-based terrorist organisations.

The Gulf States provided training and equipping local security forces in crisis-ridden African regions, especially those facing civil wars, piracy, and terrorism. The UAE assisted the Maritime Police Force of Puntland and Somali security units. It extended its military support to several countries in the Horn of Africa, the Sahel-Sahara region, and the Great Lakes, to address security threats that have far-reaching implications for regional stability. Qatar has also invested in training and equipping security forces in Somalia to help this country in its fight against piracy and terrorism (Kinkoh, 2024).

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have become involved in establishing military bases in certain African countries. The UAE has set up military bases in countries such as Chad, Eritrea, Libya, and Somalia (including the Puntland region and self-proclaimed Republic of Somaliland), which have been used by Emirati forces and affiliated militias in ongoing conflicts, particularly in Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen (Mahjoub, 2025). Concurrently, Saudi Arabia installed a base in Djibouti. The implantation of these Saudi and Emirati military posts is strategically located to sustain the continued involvement of the two countries in the Yemen Civil War (Abu Sirriya, 2019).

No other State in the Gulf region has succeeded in matching the scope and magnitude of the Emirati military engagement in Africa. The UAE has deployed soldiers and provided military equipment for active combat operations, such as those against militant Islamist groups in the Sahel region. It also participated in the NATO intervention in Libya, supplied drones to the Ethiopian government, and played a critical role in shifting the balance of power in favor of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed during the conflict with Tigrayan forces (Mahjoub, 2025).

The Gulf States have backed security mechanisms and initiatives aiming at bringing political stability to African regions facing civil wars and terrorism. Saudi Arabia and the UAE pledged

\$100 million and \$ 30 million, respectively, to finance the efforts of the G5-Sahel countries created in 2015 to combat growing terrorism in the region (News Wires, 2017). Saudi Arabia pledges \$100 million and the UAE \$30 million for the Sahel anti-terror force (France 24, 2013). Reportedly, the UAE is continuing to provide military and financial assistance to Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, following the dissolution of the initially French-backed G-5 in December 2023, due to the rise to power of military regimes opposed to Western military presence in West Africa.

Besides their individual contributions to the efforts to ensure peace and stability in many parts of Africa, the Gulf States, under the impetus of the Saudi Crown Prince, established the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) in 2015, which comprises the 6 GCC member states and 25 African countries. The objective of this coalition was to combat groups active in the Sahel-Sahara region, affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Sahel (Alam, Khan 2017). Moreover, the 'Red Sea Security Alliance' (RSSA), created in December 2018, intended to reinforce peace and security in and around the North of Africa while protecting water navigation lanes for trade. By January of 2019, Saudi Arabia and other states

forming the RSSA conducted naval exercises known as 'Red Wave' in the Horn of Africa. Saudi Arabia extended its efforts to enlarge and reinforce the Gulf-African security nexus through the setting up in 2020 of the Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (the Red Sea Council), which also included Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Yemen, Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti. This Council aimed at reinforcing security cooperation to tackle piracy, smuggling, and emerging maritime threats (Ardemagni, 2025). What seems striking, however, is the exclusion of the UAE from this military mechanism, an indication of the growing competition between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh in the Red Sea region and East Africa.

The Gulf States utilized economic spearheads to implement their strategic and security grand designs, in line with their projected visions for the 2030-2031 horizon. In economic terms, the objective is to reduce their dependence on the hydrocarbon sector and invest primarily in domains perceived as strategic, such as renewable energy, infrastructure, logistics, agriculture, mining, and technology. Africa remains their privileged target, as the continent offers valuable opportunities due to its vast and largely untapped raw materials, important market outlets, and vibrant youth. In the military domain, the Gulf States aim to strengthen their cooperation with African countries, particularly those located in the eastern part of the continent, to secure the political stability of their regimes and the integrity of their national territories.

Gulf cultural influence, diplomatic charity, and peace brokerage in Africa

In cultural and religious diplomacy, Saudi Arabia proved the most active State of the Gulf in extending its influence in Africa. The instruments used by the Saudis consisted of the tradition to propagate Salafism, a rigorist orthodox Islamic thought, and the role of the Saudi kingdom as the custodian of Islam's holiest shrines, as well as the facilities accorded to African Muslims to accomplish the pilgrimages. Other means included building and managing mosques and Islamic cultural centers in many African cities.

The Gulf States have carried out humanitarian assistance and relief operations through active institutions, responsible for managing foreign aid in third countries. These institutions are represented in Qatar by the Fund for Development (QFFD) and the Regulatory Authority for Charitable Activities (RACA), in Saudi Arabia by the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre, and in the UAE by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MOFAIC).

The charity diplomacy practiced by the Gulf States in Africa consisted of humanitarian and relief assistance, as well as efforts to combat epidemics and other health issues. Saudi Arabia pledged a humanitarian aid amounting to over \$45 billion to African countries affected by conflicts. Qatar has provided significant support, including food aid, medical supplies, and financial assistance, to African countries facing crises such as South Sudan, Sudan, Niger, and Somalia, through the QFFD, Qatar Charity, and the Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS). In the framework of international efforts to eliminate epidemics, QFFD and the World Health Organization (WHO) signed a three-year agreement to eliminate diseases in 49 African countries, benefiting more than 400 million people.

According to a statement made by the Deputy Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations in May 2024, Qatar, with the relief agencies of other countries, pledged \$12 million in humanitarian aid for the Horn of Africa to counter the menace of famine. In November 2023, it announced a \$20 million contribution to support African countries in obtaining Ukrainian grains (Mofa.gov). The statement also indicated that Qatar has provided humanitarian assistance to Sudan and other poor countries, in addition to the disbursement of \$60 million for the benefit of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), announced during a conference that took place in Doha in March 2023.

The United Arab Emirates provided logistics support to the COVAX initiative, facilitating access to vaccines across the continent. Additionally, it provided more than \$600 million between 2018 and 2023 to the five Sahel-Saharan countries, which faced political instability, violent terrorist attacks, and widespread famine. Abu Dhabi also provided aid to cope with the influx of displaced people from the war in Sudan to find refuge in Chad (Kinkoh, 2024).

Without questioning whether the Gulf States can broker between the US, Iran, and the Zionist entity and without confirming the postulate that they are the 'Middle East new intermediaries,' (Al Hasan, Hokayem 2025), it remains, however, that these countries have mediated in many conflicts in Africa to ensure their own interests. It happened that the Gulf States reacted, sometimes in support of the brokerage attempts carried out by other foreign powers, or in response to the failure of rival competitors in other postures. Generally, the Gulf States initiated contradictory mediation efforts because of their divergent interests and strategies in Africa. These approaches constitute, indeed, continuous and market features in their dealings with this continent.

Qatar played a key diplomatic role in past negotiations, including the Darfur conflict, the Eritrea-Djibouti border dispute, and Somali reconciliation efforts. It continued to 'flex its diplomatic muscles' in Africa by resuming diplomatic relations between Somalia and Kenya in December 2021 and mediating an agreement between the United States and the Rwandan government that resulted in the 2023 release of opposition leader Paul Rusesabagina (Mofa.Gov. 2023).

More importantly, Qatar tackled an intricate and longstanding conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), opposing the Congolese regular forces to a rebel movement (M23) backed by neighbouring Rwanda, by organizing a meeting between the Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi and the Rwandan leader Paul Kagame in Doha in March 2025 (Le Monde, 2025).

The United Arab Emirates made intense efforts, alongside a coalition that included the African Union and the United States, which led to an Agreement signed in Jeddah in September 2018, ending a two-decade conflict between Somalia and Eritrea (Stauffer, 2018).

Saudi Arabia has played a significant role in the Sudanese civil war by hosting negotiations that resulted in a Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan signed in Jeddah in May 2023 between the warring Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which included commitments to humanitarian relief and civilian protection. (Kinkoh 2024). Saudi Arabia co-hosted with Switzerland, US-led talks in Geneva in August 2024 to ease the human suffering resulting from the war in Sudan and achieve a lasting ceasefire in this country. Although the talks did not end the fighting, they positioned Saudi Arabia as an important actor in mediating complex regional dynamics, which involved also other external actors with stakes in Sudan (Kinkoh, 2024).

African Opportunities and Gulf Hurdles

Saudi Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdu Al Karim Al-Khereiji, aptly described Africa as a "continent of promising opportunities," citing its natural resources, ambitious youth, and renewable potential (Hassan, 2025). However, despite these promising assets, Africa faces significant and daunting challenges foreign partners, including the Gulf States, must navigate.

Convergent multipolar momentum and African Prospects

A political analyst asserted, "The multipolar moment gained momentum with the post-COVID era and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and as Western states focused on economic and geopolitical upheavals threatening their security, many African leaders saw neglect and self-centredness. The African embrace of multipolarity resonates with Gulf powers, which underpins their own foreign policy intending to cultivate partnerships across the east-west and north-south spectrum"(Procopio). In this context, another political scientist aptly pointed out that the Gulf States "sought to capitalize on growing frustration among African countries feeling forced to 'choose sides' in great power politics and constrained by what they see as an increasingly dysfunctional world system"(Dent, Ferragamo 2024). In fact, changes in the regional arena and international scene, whether concerning opportunities for cooperation or security alliances and imbroglios, have brought the Gulf States closer to Africa. Accordingly, some experts see "growing Gulf-Africa ties as emblematic of the changing power dynamics in global politics. They describe a larger trend in diplomacy toward multipolarity, in which regional powers such as Brazil, India, Turkey, and the Gulf states become increasingly assertive (Dent, Ferragamo 2024)."

The strengthening of the BRICS group, which is seriously challenging the hegemony of the Western world, may further reinforce the intertwining links between the Gulf States and African countries concerning geostrategic and security designs, economic and military cooperation, and enhance the capacities of the African countries to search for a more autonomous way of development and better foreign policy options. The empowerment of the BRICS, for instance, has permitted the expansion of this grouping in August 2023 to include two African countries (Egypt and Ethiopia), three Middle Eastern states (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran), and an Asian country (Indonesia). Thus, the Afro-Gulf

connection is gaining importance, as half of the 10 countries comprising the BRICS bloc originate from the Gulf region and Africa. This connection may have three dimensions on the Gulf-Africa equation in the context of current new mutations in the regional and world scenes:

From a political standpoint, this connection will bring Africa's concerns to the centre of the BRICS' focus as it attempts to alter the world's geopolitical configuration. To fill the vacuum, the Gulf States came to the rescue with flexible development schemes and rapid availability of funds.

From a security perspective, this connection will strengthen military cooperation between the Gulf States and African countries in combating piracy and terrorism. It will also enhance coordination on these issues with China, India, and Russia, which have a strong footprint in Africa and pursue geostrategic and security designs, notably in the Gulf of Aden, the western parts of the Indian Ocean, and the Horn of Africa. An African scholar rightly noted that it would be "crucial to bridge diplomatic efforts between Gulf and African states in the Sahel region and in conflict areas like Sudan, Libya, and Somalia to scale efforts to resolve current disputes and stop simmering ones" (Kinkoh, 2014).

The Gulf States have participated in African collective security mechanisms and peace initiatives, enhancing the partnerships between the two partners as both share the same security threats, consisting mainly of the Houthis movement in Yemen and the Shabab groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Qatar declared its "pride in advancing strategic partnership with the African nations at all levels," according to a statement made by Deputy Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations in May 2024 at the open debate of the Security Council on 'Peace and Security in Africa: Addressing Root Causes of Conflict in Post-Pandemic Recovery in Africa' (Mofa.gov. 2024). The statement also underlined Qatar's "unwavering efforts in the areas of preventive diplomacy, mediation in conflict, and peace-making in Africa," and its efforts to achieve the initiative to 'silence the guns' launched by the AU in 2013 (Zeghlami, Iratni 2025), and participate in ensuring a sustainable and predictable funding to support AU-led peacekeeping operations.

The Gulf States' current support for initiatives undertaken by the AU or RECs to counter transnational security threats, such as terrorism, international organized crime, and smuggling activities, would be crucial for the stability of both the Gulf region and Africa. Aggressive expansionism of the Zionist entity, Iran's role of troublemaker in the Middle East, as depicted by the Gulf States, coincided with the high triviality of the East African region, being wracked by instability, with 9 out of the 12 countries in the region facing armed conflicts (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies 2025).

Coordinating efforts between the AU and the Gulf States to help resolve crises in Sudan, Libya, the Horn of Africa, and the Sahel Sahara region would appear appropriate, as it would reduce dependence on the world's major powers, whose geostrategic stakes do not necessarily align with the security issues in the Gulf region and Africa.

From an economic perspective, the expansion of the BRICS has further increased the share of the non-Western world in global GDP, strengthened the group's bargaining power, and boosted the ambitions of the Global South in its attempt to challenge US hegemony. The increase of the capital of the BRICS' Development Bank, the plans to replace the American Dollar with a unique currency specific to this group, and the payment of international transactions in currencies rather than the US Dollar, may constitute perspectives that African countries would share. These prospects may alleviate their dependence on the economies of Western powers, gain access to world markets on better terms, and benefit from digital and new technologies, which are also available in China and India at even lower prices (Iratni, 2024).

Africa's newly created free trade zone (AfTCA) constitutes a single continental market with a population of about 1.3 billion people and a combined GDP of approximately \$3.4 trillion. This continental institution expects to lift 30 million Africans out of extreme poverty, boost the incomes of nearly 68 million other Africans who live on less than \$5.5 a day, increase the continent's revenue by \$540 billion by 2030, and spur Africa's exports by \$650 billion (World Bank, 2020). It would increase intra-African trade exchanges and make Africa a powerhouse, capable of competing with major world powers and contributing to the construction of a more equitable, better-balanced, and highly stable multilateral international system (Iratni, 2024b). This vision is enshrined in the 'African Union's Agenda 2063: The Africa we want initiative,' inception by the African Union in 2015, which set a strategy for the continent's sustainable development to achieve over 50 years.

Africa is drawing expectations and attention from the international community as the 'biggest frontier of the 21st century,' according to Japanese diplomatic discourse (Iratni, 2024c). Major Powers, in addition to the Gulf States, need the resources that are abundant in Africa: minerals, energy, and land to maximize their economic capabilities and enhance their international status. The logic of the global financial system has confined Africa to the role of providing raw materials, limiting its access to industrialization and manufacturing processes (Iratni, 2024b). Thus, 83% of African countries rely on a single commodity as the primary source of foreign currency earnings. African countries account for 45% of the commodity-dependent countries worldwide (UNCTAD, 2022).

Africa is also rich in fertile lands, possessing 60% of the world's available arable land, but generating only 10% of global agricultural output (AU Int. 2023). Africa may be an essential source for agricultural product processing, located in the world's major food-producing regions, and for the needs of the Gulf countries, which import between 80% and 90% of their foodstuffs due to the aridity of their soils.

Africa is also a theatre for major world powers to 'show their muscles' and pursue their geostrategic and security interests. As many as 15 foreign countries are militarily present in the African continent and Africa shelters several bases of many world powers and emergent countries, including the Gulf States. Djibouti, which lies on the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, and which constitutes a gateway to the Suez Canal, one of the world's busiest shipping lanes, and a waypoint between Africa and the Middle East, hosts bases and military facilities in favour of

seven countries. Djibouti is the only place in the world that shelters Chinese and US bases at the same time.

Regarding the purchase of arms, African countries spent a total of \$51.6 billion in 2023 (Eureporter, 2024). Although the African arms import market represents only a marginal share of the global arms market and despite the slight but temporary decline in the volume of imported arms, some economists, like Charles Robertson, predict that the continent could transform into a "\$29 trillion economy by 2050-2060," surpassing the combined GDP of the USA and the Eurozone in 2012. As a result, the defence budgets of African countries would automatically increase, making the region a significant importer of defence equipment (Eureporter, 2024). Africa needs technology transfers and expertise that are not available in the Gulf States, and which major powers are less inclined to provide. However, the Gulf States could reserve a substantial portion of the vast financial assets they have accumulated over the years to help African countries get access to a green economy, start-up system, and innovative technologies.

Challenging African enduring plagues

Dealing with African politics can be a challenging endeavour for foreign partners. For decades, Africa has faced political turmoil, instability, and border conflicts, due mainly to the colonial legacy. Colonial domination has resulted in the arbitrary demarcation of frontiers at the expense of the cohesion of the African people and tribal solidarities. It has also generated inter-community animosities, the confinement of Africa as a primary source of raw materials without igniting an industrialization process, the persistence of illiteracy, and the plunder of the continent's natural resources.

Many post-colonial African States have duplicated the colonial predicament by installing dictatorships and maintaining economic dependency on their former colonial powers. They have also relied on repressive apparatuses, drained national health for the benefit of western-oriented elites, and practised nepotism and widespread corruption. These political, social and economic impairments have facilitated the interference of foreign powers in African affairs, whether through direct military interventions (France and USA) in recent past, or supporting warring parties in African conflicts for influence and economic interests (the Gulf States). Like other external actors, the Gulf States became embroiled in civil wars, border disputes, and conflicts over regional leadership in Libya, Sudan, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel-Sahara region.

Such conflict ingredients seem perennial and thus susceptible to attracting not only the attention of major powers but also the Gulf States, because many of the factors that menace the instability of many African countries may also threaten global security in general and peace in the African countries adjacent to the Gulf region, in particular. These risks may be possible due to the transnational dimension of security threats, such as terrorism, piracy, human trafficking, and pandemics.

The Gulf States and Saudi Arabia in particular are vulnerable to threats posed by the Houthis and the Shabab, especially after the junction of these extremist groups and their ability to acquire and use drones, as was the case with the attacks of the Houthis on the Zionist entity, during the recent aggressions against Gaza.

Tensions between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on the one hand, and Iran on the other may accentuate their war by proxy, because of the presence of pro-Iran Shia communities in the Gulf States. Shia-originated groups constitute the majority of the population in Bahrain, and about 10 to 12% in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, while representing 5 to 10% in the UAE. However, Shia represents 35% of the population of Yemen, a fact that exacerbates religious tensions in this country and spurs frictions between Yemen and other Sunni-dominated Gulf States.

The case of Bahrain is particularly significant of these ethnic-religious tensions, as highlighted during the so-called Arab Spring revolutions, when Manama faced a popular uprising, believed fomented by radical Islamists close to Tehran. These events led Saudi Arabia and the UAE to intervene militarily in March 2011, in support of the Bahraini Kingdom's efforts to crack down on the insurgents and prevent the domino effect on the rest of the Gulf region. Stuck between the hard rock of endogenous Shia threats and eventual menaces constituted by terrorism and piracy operating from eastern Africa, the Gulf States continue to face a security dilemma. This security quagmire may force the Gulf States to drain substantial financial resources to sustain a growing arms race in the Middle East and maintain, if not expand, their military presence and involvement in the domestic affairs of the Horn of Africa, in particular.

Other threats that may undermine the security of the Gulf States consist of underground migration and climate change vulnerability. Continuing conflicts in Africa may result in growing flows of refugees and illegal migrants to the rich labour markets of the Gulf States. These countries already host large communities of foreigners from Africa, a matter perceived as a potential factor that could destabilize their social fabric and national cohesion. The demographic boom in Africa is expected to continue expanding further as the continent's population rises to 1.7 billion by 2030 and doubles by 2050, making one of every four people in the world African (Iratni, 2023). Such a trend may not fail to accentuate the worries of the Gulf States, which the influx of boat people may then submerge.

According to Wendy Williams, a legal and policy expert working at Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, the route off the continent toward the Arabian Peninsula has historically been "one of the world's busiest maritime migration routes, but it also remains the most challenging for irregular migration, especially in terms of food and water scarcity. Combined, the Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula routes comprise roughly 90% of East Africa migration" (Williams, 2025).

Figures concerning the numbers of legal or irregular migrants from East Africa to the Arabian Peninsula are not available or incomplete. For instance, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs estimated that there were 3.6 million migrants from African countries in the Gulf region in 2019 (Alexander, 2021). Most of the migrants from East Africa,

which constitute 90% of African migrants, head to the Gulf States through the Saudi corridor. According to Musalia Mudavadi, Kenya's Cabinet Secretary, in all the Gulf States, Kenya is among the countries that supply the highest number of African workers, mentioning that over 400,000 Kenyans are employed in this region in 2024 (Nakuya, 2025). In 2022, Sub-Saharan Africans constituted 5.3% of Saudi Arabia's foreign population, estimated at 715,000 people (De Bel-Air, 2024). Most of the migrant workers residing in the Gulf region were women employed in domestic tasks.

African labourers working in the Gulf region constitute a safety valve for their families left behind, as the substantial remittances sent to them help to attenuate as much as possible the painful life conditions they still endure. This is a further link attaching East Africa to the Gulf region, as migration, whether legal or irregular, serves as a means for immigrants to contribute to assisting their families and the economies of their countries. Immigration also constitutes a cheap and 'servile' force for the Gulf labour market.

Another challenge emanating from Africa that may harm both Africa and the Gulf region is climate change. If persistent, this natural phenomenon would threaten Africa's agricultural productivity, water security, and livelihoods, posing risks to long-term development and investments made by the Gulf States to acquire land and secure their food supplies. The Gulf's relationship with African countries may be further entrenched "as the water-stressed desert states look to secure food supplies amid worsening climate change and protect oil-hungry markets in the global drive for clean energy"(Tehran Times, 2024). Climate change may become a daunting challenge to Gulf security, potentially emanating from Africa.

Impairments of the Gulf African policy

Being neither former colonial powers nor ancient partners of Africa, the Gulf States have developed fruitful relations with the African continent. However, this partnership was not free from hindrances on the part of the Gulf States because of their limited economic and military capabilities compared to as driven by selfish interests. Political scientists have addressed criticisms to Gulf-African sparring, especially with regard the Horn of Africa, perceived as the primary focus of Gulf States' policies towards Africa. Some scholars regarded the relationship between the Gulf region and the Horn of Africa as "highly asymmetrical, driven more by Gulf than African interests. Gulf States are injecting resources and exporting rivalries in ways that could further destabilise fragile local politics." Crisis Group (2019). Others argued that diplomacy between Gulf States and African governments "prioritizes short-term gains over long-term consequences," questioning whether these economic arrangements "offer sustained benefits for Africans" (Dent, Ferragamo 2024).

Unlike other foreign powers interfering in African politics, the Gulf States lack a developmental and economic model to export to the African continent. They have no design based, for instance, on the melting of capitalist economic ingredients and autocratic political features as expressed by the Chinese model (Iratni, 2024 d), nor the nationalist-centred vision of Russia (Iratni, Marouk 2023), or the Turkish design built on a mixture of moderate religious precepts and modernistic development patents, as practised by Erdogan's Turkiye (Iratni, 2025). Moreover, the Gulf States are not exhibiting a distinct

foreign policy or African stance, unlike the Western major powers, such as the US. Indeed, the Chinese and Russians have developed a sophisticated diatribe against the Western-dominated international system through the rejection of the universality of 'liberal-capitalistic' democratic values. Such a vision may appeal to many African countries because of their past colonial predicament and their perceptions of US hegemony over world affairs. China considers itself a developing country by moral virtue, despite having evolved into a world great power (Iratni, 2024d). At the same time, India evokes Africa as 'a sister continent' because of the common fight against Western colonialism, despite affirming itself as a world major power (Iratni, 2025 b).

The Gulf States have neither achieved world major power status nor departed from acting as subcontractors for the Western powers, especially the United States which have lessened its military and economic presence in Africa since the unsuccessful 'Restore Hope' operation conducted in Somalia in 1993 (Iratni 2018). Their political subordination and military alignment with Washington, as well as their role in inducing some countries, including Sudan, to join the 'Abraham Accords', may not bring them sympathy from many African countries. The images of President Trump extracting substantial gifts and huge amounts of money from the Gulf States, as well as the military operations conducted by the security forces of the Zionist entity against the Palestinian negotiation delegates in Doha in September 2025, may have tarnished the stature of the Gulf States in Africa. Such a weakness contrasts with the behaviour of some Gulf States in African countries regarded, sometimes, as ostentatious.

Some African experts have depicted the actions carried out by the Gulf States as subversive. They cited some activities such as those aiming to bolster military rules (Sudan), covert support in Chad, Libya (Russia's former Wagner Groups and Marshall Haftar-led army), recruitment of mercenaries from countries as far as Colombia to fight alongside the RSF in Sudan (Horner, 2025; Mahjoub, 2025; Booty & Chothia, 2025). These cases, however, may not stand as good examples to emulate.

Critics have dubbed the role of the Gulf States in Africa as a temptation to fuel conflicts, rather than contributing to bringing peace and stability. They cited, for instance, security agreements and weapons sales to combatants in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan, which have led to accusations that intra-Gulf rivalry "is playing out via proxy battles in the Horn of Africa" (Dent, Ferragamo 2024). Other critics suspected that the mediation conducted by some Gulf States involved bribery paid for the release of hostages, as it happened in the case of the kidnapping of soldiers and civilians in Djibouti by Eritrean forces in 2018, who were released thanks to Qatar's supposed equivocal brokerage (Rubin, 2025). However, Qatar's mediation efforts seemed crucial in the cases of the conflict between Eritrea and Djibouti, as well as the crisis between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda, highlighting the trust invested in this Gulf Kingdom, despite its unconventional manoeuvres.

The treatment of African migrants in the Gulf has also generated a blowback. Migrant workers, particularly women in domestic roles, have reported instances of underpayment, physical abuse, and passport confiscation. Sometimes, women found themselves bound by the *Kafala* system, which ties their visa to their employer (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2025). Deportees in Addis Ababa documented exploitation, trafficking, and violence that

"begin from the moment the migrants set off across the Red Sea or Gulf of Aden to reach the Arabian Peninsula"(Ayene, 2019). Reports have revealed the dour working conditions many Africans faced in the Gulf States (Dent, Ferragamo, 2024).

An African security expert criticized the UAE's involvement in the gold trade in eastern African countries (Rwanda, DRC, and Sudan) and raised allegations that Dubai has become "a hub for gold smuggling and money laundering through its gold markets and refineries"(Mahjoub 2025). He also cited, in the same article, a statement issued by the US Treasury Department in 2022 asserting "more than 90% of DRC gold is smuggled to regional states, including Uganda and Rwanda, where it is then often refined and exported to international markets, particularly the UAE."

The Head of Dubai's Commodities Exchange, Ahmed bin Sulayem, answered the accusations head on by asserting at a conference held in December 2021 that "I want to address the elephant in the room: namely, the consistent and unsubstantiated attacks launched on Dubai by other trading centers and institutions."They are lies"(Bloomberg News 2021).

Conclusion

The Gulf States have proven they are no longer 'Lilliputians' because they have grown up, thanks to their oil wealth, economic diversification, and alliances with major powers. However, they are still in the posture of 'David,' the young, but little shepherd, before defeating the giant Goliath. If the Gulf States have the means to intervene in African politics, they still lack the necessary military means to protect their own security. They also lack the scientific knowledge to compete with the leading countries in digital and innovative technologies. Anyway, they have come a long way from Bedouin and archaic societies to become progressively financial hubs and modernized countries, conducting relatively autonomous policies towards Africa, while managing the interests of other rival powers on the continent, such as the US, Russia, and Turkey.

Ventures in Africa did not prevent the Gulf States from adopting contradictory and opposing stances, reflecting their rivalry over regional leadership and power status. Yet, they continue to navigate the Middle East conundrum with much uncertainty and pursue their efforts to expand their influence in Africa, benefiting from its mineral resources to ensure energy and ecological transitions, amid fierce competition and security risks due to turmoil in the Middle East and Africa.

It may be too premature to predict the future policies of the Gulf States towards Africa, given the uncertainties of rapid international and global changes, on the one hand, and the contradictory ambitions of some countries, located in either the Gulf region or Africa, on the other. However, geographic proximity, historic ties, and security concerns may remain significant factors in cementing cooperation between the two partners, although some major powers may attempt to disrupt this seemingly promising Gulf-African partnership.

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