

THE PERILS AND PROMISES OF GULF STATES' ENGAGEMENT IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

AWOL ALI MOHAMMED

awolali1989@gmail.com

College of Law and Governance, Hawassa University, Hawassa, Ethiopia

Abstract

The Horn of Africa has long been a region of strategic importance, situated at the intersection of global trade routes and geopolitical interests. The Gulf States have emerged as critical regional players in recent years, deepening their political, economic, and security engagement. This research explores the drivers and consequences of the Gulf States' increasing influence in the Horn of Africa. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, the study integrates primary and secondary data sources to investigate the rationales behind the Gulf States' involvement and the impact on inter-state relations in the Horn of Africa. The findings indicate that the region's proximity to the Red Sea, Nile basin, and oil-producing Gulf States has rendered it geopolitically crucial despite its political and economic fragility. The United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are actively expanding their spheres of influence in the Horn of Africa, mainly by developing commercial ports and military bases along the Red Sea coast. This unprecedented rise in cross-Red Sea cooperation challenges traditional paradigms and erodes established boundaries, introducing new regional rivalries and the potential for increased instability. The study concludes that the Gulf States' growing presence in the Horn of Africa presents both promises and perils for the region. While the engagement has brought economic opportunities, it has also heightened the complexity of regional dynamics, requiring the Horn of Africa countries to navigate these delicate geopolitical waters with care.

Keywords: Gulf-States, Horn of Africa, Geopolitics, Regional-dynamics, Economic-engagement, Security

1. Introduction

The Horn of Africa is recognized as one of the most strategically important regions globally due to the significance of the Nile River and the Red Sea, which highlight its geostrategic value (Mesfin, 2004). This region is crucial for international trade, maritime security, anti-piracy operations, counterterrorism activities, and access to the extensive oil reserves of the Middle East and Arab Gulf states (Amare, 1998). Essentially, the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea form a complex, unstable, and under-researched area of substantial strategic importance (De Waal, 2017).

Historically, the Horn of Africa has been a critical intersection for north-south and east-west trade routes. The rise and fall of empires and the longstanding presence of Islam and Christianity have significantly shaped the region. The Nile River, originating in the Horn and flowing into Egypt, creates a critical alliance among nations. For millennia, the inhabitants of the Horn of Africa have conducted trade with the Gulf region and

beyond, establishing connections that span the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean (Alexander, 2016). This historical interconnectedness has drawn external powers, making the region a battleground for foreign interests. Poor governance, coupled with regional destabilization and external interference, perpetuates a state of constant insecurity (Alexander, 2016).

Recently, Gulf States have increased their activities around the Red Sea, partly due to the conflict in neighbouring Yemen (Richard, 2015). Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar have become significant players in the Horn of Africa (Abdi, 2017). These nations view the Horn as an essential trading partner for non-fossil fuel commodities (Jos, 2018). Specifically, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have aimed to establish long-term military and commercial presences on both sides of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, enhancing the geostrategic and economic importance of the Horn

(Khan, 2018).

The region's vulnerability and insecurity have made it a focal point for regional and international challenges, necessitating external military presence and financial aid to achieve peace and security. Despite these challenges, Gulf States have entrenched themselves in the region's political, economic, and security landscapes. They consider the Horn of Africa a secondary security belt due to its geographical proximity, regional security concerns, political interests, shared cultural values, and historical ties. Consequently, Gulf States have adopted practical trade and investment policies in the region to further their political and economic agendas while addressing their security concerns (Laeed, 2019).

The Horn of Africa remains a strategic focal point in various international conflicts, including religious clashes, neocolonialism, West-China rivalry, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the Iranian-Saudi GCC dispute. The region's lack of democratic governance, social justice, press freedom, and law and order perpetuates political vulnerability. Societal challenges such as poverty, disease, narcotics, and piracy exacerbate these issues. The economy faces obstacles like a shortage of raw materials, lack of expertise, inefficiency, and rising corruption (Nolte, 2010).

The Horn of Africa continues to exemplify poor management and instability, further complicated by repeated foreign military interventions. The region's fragility and volatility could spark interstate, intrastate, ethnic, and proxy wars. Scholars argue that external actors are primarily responsible for the region's volatility. Over the past decades, the Gulf States' growing presence across the Red Sea has significantly influenced the current order in the Horn of Africa. This increasing presence presents substantial policy challenges as external actors pursue their goals amidst the region's longstanding tensions and disputes (Agenda, 2019).

Therefore, it is crucial to thoroughly examine and contextualize the short- and long-term impacts of Gulf involvement in the Horn of Africa. Despite the rise of the Gulf States as significant players in global politics, their involvement in the Horn of Africa's political economy has not been adequately studied or articulated. This study aims to shed light on the Gulf States' expanding political and economic engagement with the Horn of Africa, analyzing the risks and benefits of their competition concerning the region's internal politico-economic situation and security. The focus is primarily on Gulf States such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, considering their geopolitical, geo-economic, and security interests and their aspirations to dominate the Horn of Africa.

2. Research Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study utilized a descriptive research design, a methodological approach suited to examining the multifaceted dynamics of Gulf states' engagement in the Horn of Africa. Descriptive research is valuable for systematically documenting and analyzing phenomena to provide a comprehensive understanding of complex interactions (Creswell, 2014). This approach aligns with the study's objective of exploring both the opportunities and challenges posed by Gulf states' involvement, such as economic development, security partnerships, and the risks of geopolitical tensions and resource exploitation (Pinaud, 2020; Verhoeven, 2018). By employing this design, the study ensures a balanced assessment of the perils and promises, offering nuanced insights supported by meticulous data collection and analysis.

2.2. Data Type

Both primary and secondary data sources were utilized for data collection. Primary data were obtained through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with key informants. The selection criteria for participants were based on their

knowledge, skills, occupations, and expertise related to the research topic. Twenty informants were selected from six governmental organizations, five experts from the Middle East department, six regional security specialists from the IGAD Organization, and Nine academicians from Addis Ababa University, Bahir-Dar University, and Hawassa University.

2.3. Instruments for Data Collection

In-depth interviews and document reviews served as the primary tools for data collection. Semi-structured and open-ended interviews were utilized to gather comprehensive information on the subject. Document reviews encompassed various related materials, including books, papers, newspaper articles, journals, conference proceedings, radio and television broadcasts, reports, and online sources, which complemented the primary data.

2.4. Sample Representativeness and Geographic Scope

The representativeness of the sample used in this study, drawn from three universities and three governmental organizations, presents potential limitations in capturing the full range of perspectives necessary to understand the impact of Gulf investments in the Horn of Africa. While the selected institutions provide valuable insights into the role of Gulf investments in the region, the narrow focus on formal institutions may overlook the voices of marginalized groups and communities, particularly those in rural areas directly affected by land deals, agricultural investments, and infrastructural projects.

For example, rural communities in Ethiopia and Sudan, displaced by large-scale land acquisitions for Gulf-funded agricultural projects, may hold different views on the benefits and drawbacks of such investments compared to urban elites or government officials (Mkutu, 2019). These communities often face significant economic and

social disruptions, such as loss of land, access to resources, and livelihoods, which may not be adequately captured in a sample drawn from academic and governmental institutions.

To address this, future research should broaden the geographic and institutional scope of the sample to include perspectives from a more comprehensive array of stakeholders, such as rural communities, civil society organizations, and local businesses. This would ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse impacts of Gulf investments across different sectors and regions within the Horn of Africa.

2.5. Risks of Self-Censorship and Political Sensitivities

The risks of self-censorship and political sensitivities were significant factors influencing the responses of key informants in this study. Given the sensitive nature of Gulf involvement in the Horn of Africa, particularly concerning issues of sovereignty, political alignments, and foreign intervention, it is likely that some respondents may have engaged in self-censorship to avoid discussing controversial topics or making statements that could be politically risky.

This is especially relevant in countries where freedom of speech is limited or political affiliations with Gulf states may influence individuals' willingness to criticize foreign investments openly (Fisher, 2020). Political and social desirability bias may also have influenced responses, as informants could have felt pressured to provide answers that aligned with official government positions or reflect positively on Gulf involvement in their respective countries.

To mitigate these risks, the research methodology incorporated multiple sources of data and cross-referenced informants' responses with secondary literature and independent reports. Additionally, ensuring the anonymity of respondents was critical in reducing the risks of self-censorship. However,

these strategies may not have eliminated the potential for biased responses. Future studies should consider more robust methodologies, such as anonymous surveys or focus groups, to reduce the influence of political sensitivities on data collection.

2.6. Data Analysis

The collected data was examined using a thematic analysis technique. This method involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data, offering a detailed and nuanced understanding of the research topic.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to all necessary research disciplines and ethical standards. Key informant interviews were conducted voluntarily, respecting the convenience of the respondents. The researcher ensured that the study's purpose, scope, and other aspects were accurately represented. Ethical principles such as confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy were strictly maintained. Additionally, the researcher avoided bias in the transcription and interpretation of the data, ensuring the integrity and credibility of the research findings.

3. Results and Discussion

The term "Horn of Africa" refers to a broader geopolitical region encompassing several countries, including Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and sometimes Sudan. This region is strategically located along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, making it a significant player in global geopolitics. The Horn of Africa is characterized by considerable conflict and instability, shaped by regional and international dynamics. The region's population faces substantial challenges, including poverty and hunger, and its natural environment is often severely impacted by recurring conflicts (Khan et al., 2023)

Literature and practical circumstances illustrate that the Horn of Africa is a hotbed of violence and insecurity. Intra-state ethnic strife, inter-state wars, and religious extremism draw strong states' attention under the guise of counterterrorism operations and humanitarian aid. Three significant issues—maritime security, violent extremism, and migration—currently draw global attention to the region (De Waal, 2017).

The Horn of Africa is a strategically vital region attracting the interest of various nations seeking to establish military bases. Turkey has a significant presence in Somalia, maintaining its most extensive overseas military base in Mogadishu. China has also established an overseas military post in Djibouti. Iran, Russia, and Saudi Arabia have also shown interest in the region, with Saudi Arabia building a Red Sea fleet (Aljazeera, 2017).

Despite a more multipolar world, the Horn of Africa's volatility is unlikely to change in the coming years. The region's instability can be attributed to internal and external factors, with internal factors being more significant. These include poverty, recurring droughts and famine, rapid population growth, urbanisation, lack of accommodation for diversity within and between states, poor governance, and ineffective policies across sectors (IRIS, 2017).

Leaders in the Horn of Africa often prioritize unilateral actions in response to international political or security issues over regional cooperation and socioeconomic integration. Mutual suspicion and support for insurgent organizations further hinder collaborative efforts to address common problems (IRIS, 2017). Addressing the Horn of Africa's instability requires comprehensive and coordinated efforts to foster regional cooperation, improve governance, and develop sustainable policies to mitigate the region's vulnerabilities. However, it will remain a source of conflict without long-term solutions to the region's fundamental issues.

3.1. The Emerging of Gulf States as a New Rivalry in the Horn of Africa

The Red Sea is a vital economic and security conduit linking the Gulf States with the Horn of Africa. With the perceived withdrawal of U.S. presence from the Middle East and the rise of economic opportunities and security risks in the Red Sea region, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have intensified their relations with Horn of Africa nations. Despite being underdeveloped and densely populated, this region offers significant economic potential for the Gulf States. At the same time, African countries benefit from much-needed financial and infrastructure investments (DeLozier, 2019).

Historically, the Red Sea has drawn the attention of international powers due to its crucial role in global trade, bounded by the Suez Canal to the north and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to the south—both essential chokepoints for oil exports and international market access. “The Red Sea is also integral to China’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative, which aims to revive the ancient Silk Road”. Consequently, Gulf States are emerging as competitors to major powers by establishing a presence in this region. Saudi Arabia is negotiating for a base in Djibouti. Turkey has established a training base and port agreement with Somalia, Sudan has partnered with Ankara and Qatar to develop a port, and the UAE controls at least eight ports or bases along the Red Sea.

Additionally, the Gulf States' interest in the Horn of Africa is spurred by the presence of failed governments, security challenges, religious radicalisation, resource competition, and food shortages. Despite these challenges, they see investment opportunities across various sectors (AlMeziani, 2012). Strengthening diplomatic ties with Horn of Africa countries, the Gulf States are advancing their economic and security interests while enhancing their influence in international foreign policy. Their perceived neutrality and

ability to offer substantial economic incentives have enabled them to succeed in peace deals where others have failed (Ragab, 2017).

The Gulf States' security initiatives in Africa aim to protect economic interests, enhance force projection capabilities, and boost international reputation. They contribute to anti-piracy efforts around Somalia and have increased their military presence through overseas bases in the Horn of Africa (Manjang, 2017). The UAE, in particular, has strengthened military relations with African states and taken on a more prominent role in global operations. Security threats from the Horn of Africa, such as piracy and terrorism, significantly influence Saudi and Emirati foreign policy agendas (Taylor, 2016).

Weber (2017) identifies three waves of Gulf State intervention in the Horn of Africa:

First Wave: Economic Changes and Diversification- Following the decline in oil prices in 2014, the Gulf States began diversifying their economies. “They revised their food security strategies and invested in agribusinesses and food production in the Horn of Africa.” The UAE’s D.P. World invested heavily in ports along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, managing most ports from Kismayo to Djibouti. Ethiopia, heavily reliant on agricultural investments from the UAE, India, Saudi Arabia, and European countries, faces constraints due to operations across the Red Sea. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has further strained Ethiopia’s relations with Egypt, as Ethiopia accuses Egypt of interfering in its domestic affairs and collaborating with Eritrea and South Sudan. The interdependence of security and economic concerns is evident in the presence of Saudi and UAE naval outposts in Eritrea and Djibouti, along with significant agricultural investments by Gulf nations in the Horn of Africa. However, the region lacks collective security or common economic frameworks to address these disruptions (Weber, 2017).

Second Wave: War in Yemen- “The second wave began with various African nations joining the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis in Yemen”. Sudan and Eritrea provided troops and naval bases, gaining political normalization and foreign exchange. This involvement helped Saudi Arabia combat in Yemen, relying on Horn of Africa allies. Sudan and Eritrea, in exchange, receive foreign currency and military bases, enhancing their domestic power and regional reputation. Particularly active in the coalition, Sudan has seen significant troop deployments and casualties in Yemen (Weber, 2017).

Third Wave: The GCC Split and the Role of Political Islam- The third wave resulted from the conflict among GCC members (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar), forcing Horn of Africa countries to choose sides and further destabilizing the region. The Gulf States have acted as external sponsors, leveraging their economic, security, and diplomatic influence to gain international support. They have promised aid, investment, enhanced security cooperation, and improved migrant rights, encouraging African states to support them diplomatically. These efforts have led some African states to downgrade ties with Iran, containing its influence in the Horn of Africa (Manjang, 2017).

Thus, the Gulf States' involvement in the Horn of Africa, driven by economic diversification, security interests, and geopolitical rivalries, has significantly influenced the region's dynamics. Their growing presence, investments, and diplomatic engagements underscore their strategic interests and the complex interplay of internal and external factors shaping the Horn of Africa's stability.

3.2. Horn of Africa as an Economic Market Place

The Gulf States are increasingly assertive in the Horn of Africa, seeking economic opportunities while safeguarding their security interests. They

view the region as a largely untapped space to extend their global influence through foreign interventions. Strengthening their economic presence in the Horn of Africa allows them to advance their security and diplomatic objectives (Khatib, 2013). Driven by economic diversification strategies, the Gulf States are reducing their dependence on oil by investing in the Horn of Africa markets, especially after the 2014 oil price slump. By 2016, the UAE had invested about \$11 billion in African assets, outpacing Saudi Arabia to become the largest GCC investor in Africa and the second largest globally after China (Odhiambo, 2015).

Fostering commercial ties in the Horn of Africa lets the Gulf States benefit from their strategic location, boost food security, and enhance their reputation as supportive Muslim actors. The region's exports to the Gulf are still dominated by oil and gas, while imports primarily include precious stones, copper, and food. Gulf investments span banking, agribusiness, extractive industries, real estate, retail, education, and transportation, with significant aid provided through soft loans.

3.3. Horn of Africa as a Political Marketplace

The Horn of Africa illustrates the development of the modern political marketplace. Including Yemen and Arabian Gulf countries in a regional analysis highlights the political economics of conflict in the Horn of Africa, enriching the political marketplace framework (De Waal, 2015). Both Red Sea sides were part of the Ottoman Empire, with its 'hub and spokes' model influencing neo-patrimonial rule (Barkey, 2008). The Abyssinian and Egyptian empires also exhibited patrimonial governance, with Egypt known for its use of mercenaries and tribalism (Troutt-Powell, 2003).

The Suez Canal's opening and the subsequent struggle for control over the Nile and Bab al-Mandab Strait transformed the region. Colonial powers aimed to secure maritime routes while

excluding their rivals. During the late colonial period, Egypt and Eritrea were the wealthiest territories in the Red Sea area, each pursuing modern governance differently (Troutt-Powell, 2003). The Horn of Africa became a Cold War hotspot in the 1960s and 1970s, marked by shifting alliances and political turmoil, epitomized by Brzezinski's comment on détente 'buried in the sands of the Ogaden' (Woodroffe, 2013).

The Gulf's economic ascendancy has substantial political ramifications, often driven by financial motives. For example, the introduction of Islamic banking in Sudan in 1977 significantly boosted the political and financial strength of the Muslim Brothers. The Gulf countries saw Sudan's political Islam expansion as a strategic opportunity (Phillips, 2013). Political and economic instability in the Horn of Africa and Yemen during the late 1970s and protracted civil wars in the 1980s brought these regions to the brink of collapse.

As the Horn of Africa's economy revived, Sudan and Somalia became minor players in an arena dominated by the Gulf States. Gulf politics are lineage-patrimonial, with family and wealth taking precedence. Gulf monarchs engage in the Horn of Africa's political marketplace as financiers and patrons, reinforcing commercialized patronage networks. This involvement differs from private and charitable funding, which follow similar patterns but serve distinct purposes.

The new wave of Gulf engagement in the Horn of Africa is driven by political and security interests, leveraging the region's economic vulnerabilities through political finance and direct loyalty payments (Obaid, 2014). Saudi and Emirati policies can influence cash flows to Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia, underscoring the intersection of political and economic interests (De Waal, 2015). While Gulf-Horn political relations can be erratic, economic ties have proven more stable (Shinn, 2017).

3.4. Gulf States' Competition and Security Implications in the Horn of Africa

Over the past decade, Middle Eastern powers' security involvement in the Horn of Africa has evolved. Initially focused on countering Iran's regional ambitions, the Gulf States also established military facilities to support operations in Yemen's civil war (Lawson, 2017). As Turkey's influence grew and divisions within the GCC emerged, the Horn of Africa became a proxy battleground for Middle Eastern and Gulf states.

These states have devised coordinated commercial and security policies for the region, aiming to maintain leadership at the East-West trade route intersection and the Red Sea. This security engagement is part of broader ambitions to play a more active role in the western and northern Indian Oceans and relations with leading Asian powers, especially amid perceived U.S. disengagement (DeLozier, 2019).

Since the early 2000s, Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies' primary security focus in the Horn of Africa has been countering Iranian influence. Iran sought access to Eritrean and Sudanese ports for naval deployment, often sending ships to the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, and the Suez Canal (BBC). Iranian naval activities aimed to outflank the U.S. and its Gulf allies (Lefebvre, 2012).

The Red Sea served as a conduit for Iran to supply weapons to Hezbollah and Hamas and smuggle arms to Houthi rebels in Yemen and Somalia. Concerns about Iran's ability to disrupt energy supplies and trade via the Bab el-Mandeb Strait arose (Fargher, 2018). However, GCC governments used economic incentives to persuade African states to reduce ties with Iran, enhance security cooperation and participate more actively in regional counterterrorism, especially in Somalia (Sheikh, 2018).

Despite losing influence due to GCC initiatives, Iran has maintained a naval presence in the Gulf of

Aden under a counter-piracy mission since 2014. Consequently, Iran and the Gulf states have engaged in proxy conflicts in the region, focusing on Yemen. Besides strengthening security ties with the Horn, GCC governments aim to expand business links. Food security, labour migration, and economic diversification drive GCC investments in African markets.

Since 2011, the Arab Spring's political upheavals have deepened Middle East divisions, with Turkey and Qatar on one side and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt on the other. Disagreements over Iran intensified these divides. The rise of Muslim Brotherhood-aligned regimes and Iran's growing influence prompted a renewed focus on the Horn of Africa for Saudi Arabia and the UAE, spurring interventionist policies.

The increased security presence of Middle Eastern and Gulf states in the Horn of Africa is motivated by food security, trade, and foreign policy interests. This has led to economic and security gains and efforts to promote stability and peace. For example, Qatar deployed peacekeepers to the Eritrea-Djibouti border from 2010 to 2017, mediating the Darfur crisis (Barakat, 2014). In 2018, Saudi Arabia and the UAE provided significant aid and investment to Ethiopia and Eritrea, helping mediate their 20-year conflict. Qatar also sought to mediate a maritime dispute between Kenya and Somalia in 2019.

However, regional and international competition among Turkey, Qatar, Iran, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia has driven much of their activity in the Horn, exacerbating regional divides. Initially centered on Iran-Arab state conflicts, the focus has shifted to intra-GCC schisms, with Turkey emerging as a rival security actor to the Gulf States (Barakat, 2014). Saudi Arabia's main regional objective is confronting Iran, particularly the Houthis in Yemen. Conversely, the UAE has broader strategic goals, extending its geopolitical influence through military bases, commercial ports, and alliances along Yemen's coast, including

attempts to control Socotra Island in 2018 (Ardemagni, 2018).

Investment patterns from the Middle East and Gulf significantly impact bilateral connections and strategic focus in the Horn, potentially setting the stage for competitive foreign and security ties. While the UAE is the largest foreign investor in Somaliland and, with Saudi Arabia, has extended substantial loans to Ethiopia, Qatar and Turkey have focused on Sudan and Somalia. Saudi Arabia is now seeking to lead new multilateral security arrangements spanning both sides of the Red Sea.

3.5. Gulf-States Engagement in the Horn of Africa: What is Behind the Scene?

In recent decades, the Gulf Arab states have significantly increased their involvement with the Horn of Africa (IISS, 2021; Ding, 2024). These states regard the region surrounding Africa's Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden as their natural sphere of influence or buffer zone (Mason & Mabon, (2022). For Saudi Arabia, the strategic objectives have traditionally been interwoven with charitable efforts, humanitarian activities, and spreading their Wahhabi faith (IISS, 2021). However, religious influence took precedence following Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution and the growing assertiveness of Shia Islam (Ibid). Until recently, economic trade was not the primary focus. The drive for influence in the region is fueled by geo-economic and geo-security motives, aiming to secure a post-oil future and prepare for potential conflicts with Iran (Mahmood, 2020).

The Gulf States have been constructing various infrastructure projects in the Horn of Africa, including schools, hospitals, government buildings, transport, ports, power stations, dams, and more (Ding, 2024). The magnitude of resources Turkey and the Gulf states deploy in their commercial and humanitarian endeavours in the Horn of Africa is considerable. However, this does not necessarily correspond to the priority given to the Horn of

Africa by policymakers in Turkey and the Gulf (Rift Valley Institute, 2022).

The heightened assertiveness of the Gulf states in the Horn of Africa has attracted significant attention, notably due to the surge in military installations and ports and the escalation in military and economic aid. Middle Eastern nations have also attempted to resolve some of Horn's most intractable conflicts, with Qatar having the most extended and prolonged standing involvement in peacemaking efforts (2020).

Consistent with the above view, interview results confirmed that:

Several factors drive Gulf Arab states to deepen their engagement in the Horn of Africa, including geographical proximity, shared history, and various economic, political, social, and cultural concerns. The strategic importance of the Horn of Africa to Gulf nations is evident when looking at a map. The Horn's coastline is just 30 kilometers (18.5 miles) from Yemen at the Bab el-Mandeb strait, a crucial sea route for oil tankers travelling from the Gulf to Europe. Additionally, geopolitics, security issues, competing religious affiliations, resource competition, food shortages, crises induced by climate change, and business investment opportunities across multiple sectors have attracted the attention of Gulf states to the Horn region (Interview, Regional Security Exper, Addis Ababa, 2023).

The Gulf states' initial engagement in the Horn of Africa was driven by worries about potential Iranian influence, especially the likelihood of Tehran securing a foothold in the Red Sea. However, the campaign represented a broader effort by Abu Dhabi and Riyadh to project more dominance across the Middle East and its environs. With the outbreak of war in Yemen in 2015, the

Saudi and Emirati Sheikhs intensified their efforts, seeking military bases on the African coast to expand land and maritime operations in the surrounding theatre (Mehari, 2017).

Their national interests drive the Gulf States' involvement in the Horn of Africa. To maintain their economic and political supremacy and food security, Gulf States are increasing their interaction with geostrategic coastal states in the Horn of Africa, particularly Ethiopia, as they believe these countries align with their national interests in many ways. In their intra-gulf rivalry, they also attempt to garner political support from Horn countries (KII, Academician, Addis Ababa, 2023).

Economic, security, and political interests drive the Gulf States' heightened involvement in the Horn of Africa. Initial concerns about potential Iranian influence, particularly Tehran acquiring a foothold in the strategically crucial Red Sea region, prompted Gulf-States' engagement (Ding, 2024). This campaign also signified a broader effort by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to assert dominance across the Middle East and its neighbouring areas (Mahmood, 2020).

According to Kerr (2013), despite the Gulf States having traded with Africans for millennia, the 2008 global financial crisis prompted them to strengthen economic connections with Africa. As Western economies struggled, Africa's rapidly growing economies and burgeoning middle classes became increasingly appealing to global investors. Significant considerations that encouraged the Gulf States to shift focus to Africa, particularly its Horn region, include establishing commercial links to capitalize on their geostrategic location, strengthening food security, and enhancing their reputation as benevolent Muslim actors.

The Gulf States' interest in the Horn of Africa is increasing, driven by various international entities with different agendas responding to longstanding regional instability exacerbated by failed states. Geopolitics, security concerns, competing religious affiliations, resource competition, food shortages, and crises caused by climate change draw the Gulf States and other nations into the Horn of Africa (Interview, 2023).

With the war in Yemen starting in 2015, the Saudi and Emirati governments intensified their involvement, seeking military bases on the African coast to expand their land and maritime operations in the surrounding theatre. The Gulf States view the Horn of Africa as an uncontested battlefield where they can test and demonstrate their rising global influence (Lons, 2021). Countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia are combating the Houthis and Al-Qaeda in Yemen to mitigate security threats. Yemen serves as a strategic transit point for weapons destined for Al-Shabaab in Somalia. Al-Shabaab has openly expressed its intention to collaborate with Al-Qaeda in Yemen against the UAE-Saudi coalition.

Economically, the Gulf States aim to diversify their economies and reduce dependency on oil by investing in African markets, which became even more crucial after the 2014 oil price drop. They seek to leverage the Horn of Africa's strategic location to boost trade and food security. The UAE has been the most aggressive in pursuing this strategy, with four key motivations: controlling maritime traffic across the Bab al-Mandab Strait, securing military bases, expanding economic ties, and limiting the influence of regional rivals like Turkey and Qatar (Lons, 2021).

While the Gulf States share some common interests in the Horn, their motivations and approaches can differ. Saudi Arabia, for example, has a milder stance toward Somalia due to its religious and

spiritual responsibilities in the Muslim world, represented by the two holy mosques. In contrast, the UAE-Saudi alliance aims to limit Turkey's growing influence in the region, while Qatar and Turkey support moderate political Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood (Mahmood, 2020). Overall, the Gulf States' expanding involvement in the Horn of Africa is driven by a complex mix of geopolitical, geo-economics, and security factors, as each state seeks to advance its national interests in the strategically significant Red Sea region.

3.6. Perils of Gulf States Engagement in the Horn of Africa

The Gulf-States' increased involvement in the Horn of Africa presents opportunities and significant risks. While the Gulf States are cultivating long-term economic and political partnerships in the region, their conflicting national interests and strategies fuel instability and insecurity. The Gulf States' engagement in the Horn is driven by several factors, including the need to diversify their economies beyond oil exports, concerns over the spread of Islamist movements, and involvement in the Yemen conflict (Ding, 2024; The United States Institute of Peace, 2020). However, their interventions often prioritize their national interests over the concrete needs of the Horn region.

For instance, the UAE aims to create micro-states in the Horn to further its strategic interests rather than supporting broad-based reforms and democratic development (The United States Institute of Peace, 2020). Its involvement in the Yemen war is driven more by a desire to fragment Yemen and exploit Yemeni islands than by humanitarian concerns (IISS, 2021). Similarly, the UAE's primary strategy involves controlling new trade routes to bolster its long-term power (The United States Institute of Peace, 2020).

In contrast, Saudi Arabia tends to maintain relationships with more prominent countries in the region due to its vast size. On the other hand, Qatar

sees the disintegration of states in the Horn as advantageous for maintaining its national interests (IISS (2021)). This jostling for dominance among the Gulf States is fueling instability and insecurity in an already fractious environment, where significant armed conflicts persist in Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Yemen. The competition over the use of the Nile between Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia remains unresolved (Tjønneland et al., 2014).

To tackle these challenges, the Horn of Africa should foster a culture of internal negotiation and compromise, utilizing the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) as a guiding framework. The international community, including Denmark and the E.U., should support these regional efforts and ensure that Gulf investments and partnerships align with the concrete needs of the Horn rather than solely serving the Gulf States' own agendas. The differing objectives of these Gulf countries can negatively impact the Horn of Africa when they become involved (Interview, Addis Ababa, 2023).

The competition among Gulf States, driven by personal, political, commercial, and ideological motivations, has fractured the Red Sea region and destabilized parts of the Horn of Africa, which is already struggling with its longstanding divisions. Following the Gulf crisis 2014, these states have become more assertive in the Horn, leading to significant investments and some positive political developments, hinting at the potential benefits of further integration. However, their involvement has also been marked by heavy-handed tactics in Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Sudan, aimed at establishing sympathetic regimes, undermining rivals, or protecting business interests.

Research indicates that the Horn of Africa, long a site of great power confrontation, is now witnessing a new rivalry on its shores. Gulf Arab countries are

intensifying their efforts to gain allies and influence in the Horn, making the region a new battleground for Middle Eastern political fault lines, including those between Iran and Arab states and among Arab governments. These rivalries merge with existing local disputes, creating new tensions that will impact the Horn's unstable power dynamics.

In a similar vein, key informant interview results confirmed that:

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Turkey are locked in a contest to influence and define the governance of a historically volatile region. This engagement is defined by two overlapping rivalries: a schism within the Gulf, pitting Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt against Qatar and Turkey, and competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In these conflicts, Africa is seen as a new venue for competition and alliance-building, especially since the Horn of Africa is poised for significant economic growth in the coming years (KII, academician, Bahir-Dar, 2023).

The Gulf States are actively engaged in proxy warfare across the Middle East, including in conflicts in Libya, Yemen, and Syria. This rivalry suggests that these countries intend to resolve their issues through proxy conflicts. The Gulf States see an opportunity to shape the Red Sea area's future economic and political landscape with their substantial financial resources. Economically, they aim to tap into underserved ports, energy, and consumer markets in the Horn of Africa to drive rapid economic growth. This power struggle increases the likelihood of new conflicts (Ding, 2024).

While the Gulf States claim to want "stability" in the Horn, their definitions vary greatly, often putting their interests at odds. Saudi Arabia and the UAE seek to control civil unrest, fearing the region could become a breeding ground for Sunni Islam-

inspired political movements and thus prioritize short-term stability imposed by strong security states (Ding, 2024). Despite advocating for open markets, they prefer to apply temporary fixes to economic issues and delay substantial reforms that could threaten the status quo. In contrast, Qatar and Turkey view public uprisings as opportunities to support parties like the Muslim Brotherhood, which they believe will benefit their long-term interests. These divergent views make relationships in the Horn a zero-sum game, pressuring nations to choose sides and supporting domestic opposition groups or local leaders when national capitals do not align with their interests (Ibid).

The 2017 Gulf conflict highlighted the risks and opportunities created by the Gulf states' zero-sum rivalry, which significantly impacted African governments. According to an IGAD research participant, the divide among Gulf Arab governments has led to division among African countries. Somalia exemplifies the effects of the Gulf rift, experiencing political and security tensions between Mogadishu's central authority and its regional states. This ongoing Gulf crisis has hindered efforts to combat Al-Shabaab, halted reform agendas, and threatened Somalia's fragile institutions. Since June 2017, the semi-autonomous federal member states have clashed with Mogadishu's neutral stance on the Middle East deadlock, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE on one side and Qatar on the other.

The deteriorating relationship between the UAE and Somalia has extended the Gulf crisis to remote areas. The Somali government has expressed dissatisfaction with military bases in Somaliland and Puntland. Although Gulf States' aid and investment have been crucial for many Somalis, the rivalry for influence in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa has added a dangerous new element to Somalia's turmoil. Mogadishu's strong neutrality stance between Qatar and other Gulf States is more theoretical than practical. No nation in the Horn of Africa can rival the financial and military strength

of Saudi Arabia or the UAE. However, the patron-client relationships often obscure the critical role of African agencies. Regional governments have leveraged the Iran-Saudi rivalry to secure substantial aid without conditions. If the material resources were insufficient, regimes used their sovereign power to pit one sponsor against the other. Eritrea is a notable example, focusing its security strategy on countering the perceived Ethiopian threat before the rapprochement (KII, Addis Ababa, 2023).

Another risk arises from the dual membership of several African states in organizations such as IGAD, the Red Sea Forum, or the Arab League. This overlapping membership can confuse which organization's principles to follow when their interests conflict. For instance, Sudan, Somalia, and Djibouti are members of both IGAD and the Arab League, creating challenges in determining which organization's priorities to uphold (Interview, 2023).

Additionally, the tendency of some Horn of Africa governments to switch sides based on utility raises questions about the sustainability of military alliances with Gulf States. The current security relationships, heavily reliant on the Yemen war, cast doubt on the longevity of the close ties between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the smaller East African countries. As exemplified by Somalia, Gulf State rivalry in the Red Sea could further destabilize the already conflict-prone Horn of Africa.

3.7. Promises of Gulf States' Engagement in the Horn of Africa

The involvement of Gulf Arab powers in the Horn of Africa presents substantial regional opportunities. Their contributions include job creation, knowledge transfer, and foreign direct investment (Rift Valley Institute, 2021). Gulf countries have provided significant aid to the region, primarily through soft loans and

unrestricted grants, which have expanded in volume and diversity since 2011. However, the region faces challenges such as high political risk and volatility, which Gulf corporations fear could lead to policy reversals by once-welcoming governments (Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2024).

The Gulf States' engagement with the Horn of Africa dates back to the postcolonial era of the 1950s and 60s but has grown significantly in recent decades. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have actively pursued establishing lasting military and economic footholds on the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea shores to solidify their roles as dominant forces in the region. This strategy involves expanding military bases and ports alongside heightened military and economic assistance (Mahmood, 2020).

While the Gulf States' involvement has offered opportunities for countries in the Horn, it has also brought risks. The growing influence of these more powerful, wealthier powers has enabled political elites in the Horn to drive domestic agendas and avoid capture by global powers. However, it has also raised the potential for destabilizing political competition, both domestically and regionally (Rift Valley Institute, 2021). The Gulf States' rivalry with Turkey and Qatar has further complicated the situation, exacerbating pre-existing divisions in the Horn. The long-term implications of the Gulf's growing presence in the region remain unclear. Still, it is evident that as Gulf Arab states exert more significant influence, the Horn of Africa's future is being reshaped.

The Gulf States have provided a significant employment market for individuals from the Horn of Africa. Remittances from Gulf countries have played a vital role in the economies of Horn of Africa nations, also serving as leverage for Gulf governments. Saudi Arabia, for example, hosts about 900,000 Sudanese migrant workers, while the UAE accommodates approximately 75,000.

Likewise, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have become important labour destinations for Ethiopia, where over 400,000 Ethiopians are employed in Saudi Arabia, many without legal status (Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2024).

While increased access to the Horn of Africa's labour market has incentivized concessions, challenges such as illegal migration, poor labour standards, and mistreatment of domestic workers frequently strain relations between the Horn of Africa and the Gulf. Despite these issues, the geographical and historical ties between the regions, trade interests, and aspirations for regional stability provide a solid foundation for Gulf engagement in Africa. Whether cooperative or competitive, Gulf countries' regional strategic interests have far-reaching implications (Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2024).

A noteworthy example of Gulf cooperation and diplomatic influence was their role in brokering the peace accord between Ethiopia and Eritrea in July 2018. The UAE and Saudi Arabia played pivotal roles through investments and diplomatic efforts, strengthening ties with Ethiopia while building on existing relationships with Eritrea. This mediation underscores the Gulf States' potential to mitigate conflicts in the Horn of Africa.

Another significant aspect of Gulf engagement is their port development strategy. Companies like D.P. World have secured concessions to manage multiple ports, complementing their broader infrastructure initiatives. The UAE's "one-belt, one-port" strategy in the Horn, akin to China's Belt and Road initiative, holds considerable promise for African nations in the long term, particularly for landlocked Ethiopia, which currently relies heavily on the port of Djibouti (Ibid).

The Gulf States have given Horn African nationals a significant labour market. Remittances from the Gulf have been an

important source of revenue for the Horn of Africa cultures in recent years and a powerful bargaining chip for Gulf governments. Saudi Arabia, for example, has roughly 900,000 Sudanese migrant labourers, while the UAE has approximately 75,000. Similarly, the GCC countries supply Ethiopia with a vibrant labour market. More than 400,000 Ethiopians work in Saudi Arabia illegally, many of them through traffickers or by overstaying their visas (Interview, Academician, Hawassa, 2023).

Expanded access to the Horn of Africa's labour market has often served as an incentive for gaining concessions. However, challenges such as illegal migration, inadequate labour standards, and mistreatment of domestic workers regularly impact interactions between the Horn of Africa and the Gulf. Due to their proximity across the Red Sea, Gulf states have maintained longstanding ties with the Horn, engaging in cooperation and competition with regional players and among themselves. Besides trade and cultural links, large Diasporas from the Horn of Africa reside and work in Gulf nations, their remittances serving as significant economic contributions to local economies. Thus, these dynamics offer economic and security benefits to the Horn region.

Geographical and historical ties, trade interests, and regional stability aspirations form robust foundations for Red Sea connections. Extensive investments by Gulf countries have firmly entrenched their involvement in Africa. The strategic interests of Gulf states in the region, whether cooperative or competitive, are comprehensive and far-reaching. A notable example of Gulf cooperation and diplomatic influence was the pivotal role played by the UAE and Saudi Arabia in brokering the historic peace accord between Ethiopia and

Eritrea in July 2018 (Interview, Academician, Addis Ababa, 2023).

Emirati diplomats fostered closer ties with Ethiopia, primarily through crucial investments and financial opportunities, complementing strong relationships with Eritrea. Therefore, Gulf-states' ability to mediate disputes in the Horn of Africa is vital. Another significant aspect is their port development strategy, DP. World, for instance, has secured concessions to manage several ports in addition to its arrangement with Somaliland. "The UAE's pursuit of a "one-belt, one-port" strategy in the Horn echoes China's One Belt, One Road initiative". This strategy holds substantial potential for African countries in the long term, particularly for Ethiopia, which relies solely on Djibouti's port.

The author argues that the growing economic and political influence of the Gulf States in the Horn of Africa has increasingly come under scrutiny, particularly concerning the erosion of local government's autonomy and their ability to maintain sovereignty over long-term policy decisions. On the one hand, the significant investments made by Gulf nations in key sectors such as infrastructure, agriculture, and port development promise substantial economic growth and modernization for countries in the Horn of Africa. For example, the UAE's investments in Ethiopian agriculture or Djibouti's port expansions demonstrate the potential for rapid infrastructural development driven by Gulf funds (Heiberg, 2021).

However, these economic engagements often carry political conditions that influence local policy decisions. Governments in the region may feel pressured to align their foreign and domestic policies with those of the Gulf investors, thus gradually ceding control over sovereign decision-making processes. This is particularly evident in foreign policy alignments, where countries may be expected to take sides in broader Gulf rivalries, such as the Saudi-Iran conflict, in exchange for continued financial support.

The implications of such dependence extend beyond economic policies, threatening to curtail local governments' political independence and long-term sovereignty. Theoretically, this aligns with the concepts of dependency theory, where economic reliance on wealthier external powers results in diminished political autonomy for the dependent states (Dos Santos, 1970). Over time, this erosion of sovereignty could create conditions where countries in the Horn of Africa become more susceptible to external manipulation, reducing their capacity to pursue independent, long-term development strategies.

The involvement of Gulf States in the Horn of Africa has contributed to both economic growth and, paradoxically, regional instability. On the economic front, Gulf investments, particularly in infrastructure and agriculture, have been instrumental in developing key sectors in countries such as Sudan, Ethiopia, and Djibouti. For instance, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have financed large-scale agricultural projects in Ethiopia, contributing to food security and export revenue (Robinson & al-Abdeh, 2019). Additionally, investments in port development, such as the Doraleh port in Djibouti, have transformed the region into a critical maritime hub, facilitating international trade and boosting local economies.

However, these economic contributions are overshadowed by the destabilizing political effects of Gulf involvement, which often exacerbate existing tensions between states in the Horn of Africa. The region has historically been prone to interstate rivalries, and the geopolitical rivalries between Gulf States—such as those between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Turkey—have only served to deepen these divides. In Somalia, for example, these rivalries manifest as Gulf-backed support for opposing political factions, which undermines efforts at political reconciliation and national unity (Harper, 2020).

Similarly, the competition between Saudi Arabia and Qatar over influence in Eritrea and Sudan has further complicated peacebuilding efforts in these fragile states, often leading to proxy conflicts that destabilize the region. While the economic investments are crucial, they are deeply intertwined with the Gulf nations' political objectives, prioritizing strategic control over economic cooperation, thus perpetuating instability rather than fostering long-term peace and development.

The long-term sustainability of the economic gains generated by Gulf investments in the Horn of Africa is subject to debate, particularly given the volatile political environments in which these investments occur. While the immediate benefits of Gulf-led projects, such as improvements in infrastructure and agricultural productivity, are evident, the political leverage that Gulf States wielded could undermine these projects' long-term viability. In countries like Sudan and Somalia, where political stability is fragile, Gulf States' investments may serve as a double-edged sword—providing much-needed economic development while simultaneously increasing dependence on external actors.

For instance, the UAE's port investments grant significant economic benefits in the short term but also enable the UAE to exert disproportionate influence over local government decisions, particularly in trade and security (Hassan, 2020). This raises concerns that the economic benefits of such investments may not be sustainable if they are continually tied to Gulf interests and political leverage.

The Gulf States' ability to use economic dependency as political coercion threatens these nations' long-term autonomy and economic sovereignty. Furthermore, the volatility of Gulf States' political priorities—driven by their own internal and regional dynamics—means that investment flows could be abruptly reduced or redirected, leaving the Horn of Africa exposed to

significant economic risks. The long-term sustainability of Gulf investments is thus precarious, as it is contingent on maintaining favourable political relations, often subject to rapid changes and external shocks.

The Horn of Africa has become increasingly susceptible to becoming a battleground for the rivalries between Gulf States. To mitigate this risk, regional mechanisms must be strengthened to manage external influences and promote stability. One of the most viable solutions is enhancing the capacity of regional organizations like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to mediate and regulate the influx of foreign investments and political engagements in the region. IGAD, which already plays a significant role in conflict resolution and regional integration efforts, could develop a framework for ensuring that foreign investments, particularly from the Gulf States, contribute positively to regional development without exacerbating political tensions (Tadesse, 2021).

For instance, by negotiating regional investment agreements or developing guidelines for external involvement in local economies, IGAD could act as a mediator that balances the economic benefits of Gulf investment with the need to protect local sovereignty and political stability. However, the feasibility of such mechanisms is limited by the existing power dynamics within the region, where weaker states may find it difficult to resist the economic allure of Gulf investments despite their potential destabilizing consequences.

Furthermore, the African Union (AU) could also play a critical role by providing a broader continental framework that governs foreign investments and minimizes the risks of geopolitical rivalries spilling over into Africa. This would protect the Horn of Africa from becoming a proxy battleground for the Gulf States and promote a more integrated and cooperative regional economic development strategy.

Intra-Gulf rivalries between states like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Turkey have profound implications for regional integration efforts in the Horn of Africa. The competition between these Gulf States often translates into conflicting alliances with nations in the Horn, fragmenting the region's ability to pursue coherent and unified policies. For example, while Ethiopia has cultivated strong ties with Turkey and Qatar, Sudan has aligned more closely with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, leading to divergent regional foreign policy objectives (Meester & van den Berg, 2020).

These competing alliances undermine efforts at regional integration by fostering divisions rather than cooperation. In many cases, the economic investments from the Gulf States are strategically directed to gain political influence, which further complicates regional efforts to develop unified strategies for development and stability.

The consequences of this are twofold. First, it creates a fragmented regional policy landscape where countries are more focused on their bilateral relationships with Gulf investors rather than working toward collective regional goals. Second, it increases the likelihood of proxy conflicts, where rivalries between the Gulf States play out through their allies in the Horn of Africa, deepening existing tensions and making regional integration efforts more difficult. To address these challenges, IGAD and the AU could work towards fostering greater transparency and coordination in foreign policy among Horn of Africa nations, ensuring that regional objectives are prioritized over external interests.

4. Conclusion

The Gulf states' increased engagement in the Horn of Africa is driven by a complex mix of economic, security, and political interests. Concerns about potential Iranian influence, particularly the possibility of Tehran acquiring a foothold in the strategically important Red Sea region, initially

prompted the Gulf-states' involvement in the Horn. However, this campaign also represented a broader effort by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to project more dominance across the Middle East and its surrounding areas.

With the outbreak of the war in Yemen in 2015, the Saudi and Emirati governments doubled down on their involvement, seeking military bases on the African coast as they tried to expand their land and maritime operations in the surrounding theatre. The Gulf states view the Horn of Africa as a largely uncontested battlefield where they can test and demonstrate their rising global influence.

Economically, the Gulf states have sought to diversify their economies and reduce dependency on oil by investing in African markets, which became even more crucial after the 2014 oil price drop. They aim to leverage the Horn of Africa's geostrategic location to boost their trade and food security. The UAE has been the most aggressive in pursuing this strategy, with four key motivations: controlling maritime traffic across the Bab al-Mandab Strait, securing military bases, expanding economic ties, and limiting the influence of regional rivals like Turkey and Qatar.

While the Gulf states share some common interests in the Horn, their motivations and approaches can differ. Saudi Arabia, for example, has a milder stance toward Somalia due to its religious and spiritual responsibilities in the Muslim world, represented by the two holy mosques. In contrast, the UAE-Saudi alliance is attempting to limit Turkey's growing influence in the region, while Qatar and Turkey have supported moderate political Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood. The Gulf states' expanding involvement in the Horn of Africa has produced mixed consequences.

On the one hand, their economic engagement has brought significant opportunities in job creation, knowledge transfer, and foreign direct investment. However, their competition, fueled by personal,

political, commercial, and ideological factors, has also contributed to regional tensions and insecurity, religious radicalization, and the escalation of divisions among Horn of Africa countries. Overall, the Gulf states' involvement in the Horn of Africa is driven by a complex web of interests and has the potential to reshape regional dynamics. Effective engagement requires a nuanced understanding of the unique roles played by different Gulf actors in the region rather than a generalized and securitized assessment of the risks associated with their influence.

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