



The “Borderlandization” of the Horn of Africa in Relation to the Gulf Region, and the Effects on Somalia

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, the Gulf states and their rivals have become major players in domestic and regional politics in the Horn of Africa. Through the process of “borderlandization,” their influence has contributed to the shift of the region, and particularly Somalia, from an African borderland to an Arabic-Muslim borderland. In addition, borderlandization has provided a framework for the import into Somalia of conflicts between Gulf states and the debate between different Muslim countries, which could easily jeopardize the fragile Somali state. This is due to the fact that factionalism and division are deeply embedded in Somali politics, thus creating an opportunity for local groups to employ the support of foreign actors to maximize their influence and power.

KEYWORDS

Borderlands; border regions; foreign relations; politics and government; Gulf; Horn of Africa

1. Introduction

The states of the Horn of Africa have been widely exposed to the rivalries of the Gulf region (especially between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and between Qatar and its neighbors),¹ making the region the next battleground of the Gulf powers. The increasing presence of Middle Eastern states has been a historical phenomenon in East Africa; however, the current situation is distinct from previous episodes due to its intensity and its negative effects on domestic and regional stability. The Qatari crisis in 2017² represented a turning point in the process, adding a new layer to the antagonism. Through the developments, the interdependence between the Horn of Africa and the Gulf region has increased significantly. The debate about the inherency of the Horn region to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has been ongoing for decades. Nevertheless, the above-described changes represent a turning point, as the nature of the complex relations has changed significantly (see e.g. Mahmood 2019; Marsai 2019; Cannon and Donelli 2020).

The present article argues that in recent years, the Horn of Africa – particularly Somalia – became a *borderland* of the Gulf region, not just geographically, but also from a political and security perspective. We must emphasize that it is not merely a transformation, but also a shift. The Horn of Africa always served as a borderland between the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and –sometimes– Europe, but the role and influence of different actors have regularly changed, and the leading force has varied across the centuries, and

sometimes within just decades. What we see now is a shift, mainly in the case of Somalia, from African domination to a more robust Middle-East presence. In addition, it also means that the rivalry within the wider Gulf region affects the region, bringing in new, mainly destructive and dangerous dynamics.

This development should not be considered a mere theoretical categorization, as it affects political processes on the ground. In order to prove our argument, we first give an overview of the process of borderlandization through two conflicts, after which we turn to the case study of Somalia to show the practical consequences of the phenomenon on the ground. Thus, the article has two aims: first, to interpret the deepening relations between the two regions, and second, to generalize the attributes of the “borderlandization process.” In addition to the use of traditional secondary sources, we also conducted interviews with officials and researchers in Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Somalia, the results of which are incorporated in the study.

1.1. Regional Borderlands and Their Geopolitical Attributes

Since the emergence of a regional focus in International Relations (IR) after the Cold War, the exact separation and the status of countries belonging to multiple regions has attracted the attention of researchers. In their 2004 book *Regions and Powers*, dealing with regional security complexes (RSCs), Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003, 41) differentiate between two types of such regions: “zones of weak interaction,” namely territories that do not really belong to any RSCs; and insulators, locations facing “both ways [...] occupied by one or more units where larger regional security dynamics stand back to back.” Later, they further argue that RSCs should be regarded as mutually exclusive; consequently the world map should be divided up into RSCs, insulator states, and global powers (Buzan and Wæver 2003, 48). Nevertheless, interactions between units of different RSCs can change the internal dynamics of regional complexes as well as their borders, through either external transformation (the modification of state or regional boundaries) or overlay (the major intervention of external powers that alter internal dynamics) (Cannon and Donelli 2020, 507).

Samuel P. Huntington uses a similar conceptualization in his book *Clash of Civilizations*, but in contrast to Buzan and Wæver, he does not focus on security dynamics but instead on cultural and normative differences. Rather than RSCs, he talks about civilizations as sub-global but supra-state units of the international system, whereas his insulators are conceptualized as “torn countries” located on civilizational fault lines (Huntington 1993, 42–45).

Both conceptual frameworks reflect on the heterogeneity inside a perceived broader unit (whether a regional security complex or a civilizational block) in terms of power dynamics, mostly focusing on the stronger actors (regional powers and core states respectively). Nevertheless, the two frameworks fail to reflect on the fact that weaker actors, especially if they are physically located on the edge of the given geographic unit, face peripheralization, the weakening influence of the core, and the possible influence of other RSCs or civilizations. Such territories can be called *civilizational borderlands*, defined as “historically changing, located between the discussed civilisations’ territory with a specific concentration of historical, ethnic, religious, political, language and other borders” (Sadowski 2009, 88).

The term “borderland” is nevertheless normally used in a much broader geopolitical sense (Flint 2006, 147–148). “In territorial terms,” argues David Newman (2003, 18), “it means the area in closest geographic proximity to the State border within which spatial development is affected by the existence of the boundary.” In such territories, “a great deal of hybridization takes place” (Newman 2003, 19), both from a political and a social perspective. While most authors use the concept of borderlands in connection with state boundaries, it is possible to expand the concept to regions as well. From this perspective, the process of borderlandization is connected to the issue of shifting borderlands (Hassner 2002) as a result of the relocation of borders (Konrad 2015). According to Victor Konrad (2015, 7), the reconciliation of borders usually takes place through the process of negotiations as a result of a “breaking point reached at the border”; a “sudden shift in behavior of a system arising from a small change in circumstances.” This development is characterized by “interactions and flows among local cross border culture, local cross-border clout, market forces and trade flows, and political activities of multiple levels of governments,” as well as identities (Konrad 2015, 4, citing Brunet-Jailly 2005, and Konrad and Nicol 2008, 2011).

Investigating the process is methodologically difficult. In our analysis, we build on the Regional Powers and Security Framework (Stewart-Ingersoll and Frazier 2012) and the subsequent empirical investigation of Cannon and Donelli (2020), who also investigated the changing dynamics between the Horn of Africa and the Middle Eastern regional complex. They arrived at the conclusion that despite the intensification of inter-regional interactions, there is no overlay taking place between the two RSCs.

Our research aims at contributing to existing literature in two ways. First, we apply the notion of moving borderlands at the regional level and identify its effects on regional and domestic dynamics. Thereby, we challenge the conclusions of Cannon and Donelli, who consider the merging of two RSCs as a binary issue, without the third option captured by the concept of borderlandization. Second, we argue that in a similar way to the relationship between regional security complexes (which is a political term) and civilizations (which is normative), civilizational borderlands also have a political change; specifically areas that are located on the periphery of at least one RSC. The international relations of such areas are shaped by the security dynamics of the RSCs, albeit to a lesser extent and in a mixed way with local dynamics. Hereafter, we accordingly refer to such territories as “regional borderlands,” and argue that due to the events that have taken place in recent years, the Horn of Africa – and especially Somalia – became such a region in relation to the Gulf through the extension of the Gulf RSC’s borders.

The case of Somalia is interesting for two reasons. First, the country works as the “borderland of the borderland” in the Horn of Africa; the periphery of the whole region. Second, as a result of its fragile status, it has limited power to resist the influence of other foreign actors. Therefore, the effects of the borderlandization are more visible in the case of Mogadishu and the Federal Member States (FMSs) than in other countries.

1.2. Becoming a Regional Borderland – the Horn of Africa and the Gulf

The Horn of Africa is usually not regarded as a sub-region belonging to the Middle East and North Africa (Huliaras and Kalantzakos 2017). Nevertheless, relations between the societies of the two regions have existed since ancient times through trade, migration,

and religious and tribal ties (Lewis 2002, 18–20; Marcus 2002, 1–11). In modern times, interstate relations were formed only after the emergence of territorial states, especially in the 1950s (Khan 2018). The first turning point in the history of inter-regional relations was the oil boom in the 1970s (Meester, van der Berg, and Verhoeven 2018, 12–15), which set in place the asymmetric nature of relations that has existed ever since. Accompanied by local economic problems, growing oil prices created severe balance-of-payment deficits in the energy importer states of the Horn of Africa. Governments urged their citizens to work in the Gulf economies and send back remittances, which – complemented with development assistance and foreign direct investments sent by the oil monarchies – created a highly unequal interdependence between the two regions.

Early political interactions were usually framed in the global setting of the Cold War or other regional conflicts connected to it (e.g. the Israeli-Arab conflict or the “Arab Cold War”). For example, Saudi Arabia was a member of the so-called “Safari Group” – also comprising Egypt, Morocco, Iran, and France – which aimed to counter the Communist presence in the region (Huliaras and Kalantzakos 2017). Documents in the Hungarian National Archive also amply illustrate the effects of the dynamics between the different Arab nations on the Horn of Africa, mainly in the case of the Eritrean independence struggle, the Ethiopian transition after 1974, and the political – and later, armed – conflict between Addis Ababa and Mogadishu in Ogaden. The last of these was stoked by different Arab capitals, mainly Riyadh (Lewis 2002, 234). Nevertheless, the main goal of these efforts was to transform the Red Sea into an “Arab Sea,” rather than to establish a strong presence in Africa. Furthermore, the politics of the Gulf states lacked a clear and comprehensive vision of what they wanted to achieve on the African shores of the Red Sea, and their actions were often ad hoc and temporary (HNA 1945–1990).

After the Cold War, global dynamics ceased to work as a structuring framework for inter-regional interactions. Local developments (such as the failure of the United Nations Operation in Somalia, or UNOSOM, missions and the American casualties in the infamous “Black Hawk Down” incident in Mogadishu in 1993) also contributed to declining Western and African interest in the region, leaving room for the Gulf states to form the Horn of Africa into a borderland. Furthermore, the internal dynamics of East Africa – including the collapse of the Somali state, the slow recovering of Ethiopia, and the war between Addis Ababa and Asmara – also mitigated the chance for African capitals to form a balanced relationship with Middle East powers, thus contributing to maintaining the asymmetric linkages, particularly in the case of Somalia.

Sunni monarchies had three main motives to expand their regional security complex. First, geopolitical considerations related to proximity, maritime trade, and the growing importance of the Red Sea (due to the Bab el-Mandeb and the 4000 km long coastline) and the Eastern Maghreb (due to the headwater of the Blue Nile located in Ethiopia, providing 90 percent of the water in the Nile system) increased the importance of the region (Lefebvre 2012; Vertin 2019). Second, economic incentives to build relationships included the agricultural potential, the labor force, and investment opportunities in the region to enable the economic development of Gulf countries (Shepherd 2013; Huliaras and Kalantzakos 2017; Todman 2018). Third, the re-engagement of global actors in Eastern Africa also drew the attention of Gulf states, especially the engagement of the United States after 2001 in the context of counter-terrorism (Melvin 2019, 5–8), as well as of Turkey, Russia, and China (Vertin 2019).

The Gulf states had a two-tier approach to building relations with the Horn of Africa. First, at the interstate level, they deployed financial incentives for cooperation, a strategy that fits into the economic statecraft approach (Young 2017). Second, at the transnational level, they supported ideologically friendly networks and non-state actors, especially Islamist or religious ones (Interview A 2012; Interview B 2015). The second tier was needed both to minimize the threat of relying too much on a single political actor and to alter the social normative environment of societies in the Horn of Africa; a step to aid the emergence of the region's borderland status.

The expansion of the Gulf region's interstate dynamics to the Horn of Africa, and the creation of the borderland, was conducted through two conflicts that served as breaking points for the process. The first related to the rising influence of Iran and the subsequent Saudi reactions. By building relations with Horn of Africa countries in the 1990s and the 2000s, Tehran wanted to ease its isolation (Feierstein and Greathead 2017) as well as to outflank the Gulf monarchies (Mari 2017, 57). Sudan can be considered as the first country with which Iran managed to build relations, enabling the presence of Iran-linked organizations in the country (Kemp 1996, 126); a relationship that was interpreted in the framework of the Islamization of Sudanese politics (Makinda 1993). After 2006, Tehran also managed to build cooperation with Eritrea (Lefebvre 2012), with the primary motive of defying the pro-Ethiopian policy of the U.S.

The security presence of the Gulf states was built up as a reaction to growing Iranian influence. In 2016, Saudi Arabia pressured Sudan to change its stance on cooperating with Iran (The Guardian 2016) in exchange for approximately 1 billion USD of financial support (Huliaras and Kalantzakos 2017). The UAE struck a deal with Eritrea to use its facilities in the Assab and Hanish Islands, and another with Somaliland to build up an air and naval base in Berbera (Huliaras and Kalantzakos 2017). Realizing that the isolation of Eritrea provided leverage for Iran to build up its relations, the Emirati government also helped to achieve a peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2018, aimed at ending the decades-long conflict (Reuters 2018).

Most actors in the Horn of Africa of course did not play a passive role, but tried to capitalize on the growing rivalry of Gulf states, aiming to realize economic gains without any major loyalty in bilateral relations (Todman 2018). As we will see, Somalia was an excellent example of this practice, and after a long – and not welcomed – Ethiopian and partly Kenyan patronage, Mogadishu was ready to switch its relations to deeper Arab-Turkish ties (Interview C 2014). In addition to the destabilization effect resulting from the prioritization of short-term profit over strategic alliances, this behavior in practice meant the acceptance of the borderland status of Somalia, and to some extent, the whole Horn of Africa.

The second conflict that fostered the process was the Gulf rift between Qatar and its neighbors that erupted in 2017. However, the escalation of the rivalry between the two blocks had become manifest earlier. In the 2000s, Doha started to build up its presence, though keeping a low profile (Huliaras and Kalantzakos 2017). In 2008, the government engaged in the Darfur peace process, which led to the 2010 ceasefire agreement between the central government and the Justice and Equality Movement. In the same year, Qatar managed to broker a deal between Eritrea and Djibouti, and it also deployed a small peace-keeping contingent (which left the area in 2017). The Qatar National Bank invested in Sudan heavily during the 2010s. Qatar Petroleum and its subsidiaries

acquired substantial shares in local energy companies and projects, most of them related to the French company, Total (Augé 2016, 17). Apart from energy, the main target sectors for Qatar have been mining, construction, and tourism (Augé 2016, 17).

In addition to economic tools and mediation, Qatar also built diplomatic ties in Africa. Between 2013 and 2015, Qatar opened eleven new embassies, which is a much higher number than that of its neighbors: between 2010 and 2018, the UAE managed to open only nine, Saudi Arabia six, and Kuwait only two (Todman 2018). According to interviews conducted with African diplomats, from their perspective, the reasons to establish deeper ties with Qatar have mostly been of an economic nature (Augé 2016, 10). The push by Doha was partly connected to the growing Turkish interest in the region, which contributed to both the dynamics on the ground and the negative perception of the Saudi-Emirati tandem.

The Qatari presence in Africa and the Horn of Africa became securitized as the tensions between Doha and its neighbors increased. In the conflict, the continent became the second front of rivalry due to the massive presence of all the stakeholders. Announcing an anti-Qatari coalition, Saudi Arabia and the UAE invited many African nations to join, and some did: Comoros, Eritrea, Mauritania, Mauritius, and Senegal cut all diplomatic ties with Qatar, while Chad, Djibouti, and Niger downgraded theirs (Khan 2018). In reaction, the Qatari emir had soon visited Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, and Senegal by the end of 2017 to strengthen bilateral ties.

The decision by African states to take a side was mainly not for ideological reasons, but instead based on a materialistic calculation about the gains provided by either side; mostly of an economic nature. This development was in line with the history of interactions between the Gulf and the Horn of Africa, which was framed as a zero-sum competition fought with financial incentives. However, there were three reasons why this strategy did not lead to a stable situation for the Gulf regimes. First, the rivalry could never end, as there was always a possibility that the other side might offer higher rewards. Second, this type of conduct does not result in stable political relations or loyalty, but instead incentivizes short-term, cash-grabbing behavior among the partners. Third, the export of the rivalry led to more instability in the region that was not in the interests of either the Saudi-Emirati or the Qatari side, as it created unpredictability. As a result, many signs indicated that Gulf states altered their strategy, which resulted in easing tensions in the Horn of Africa that can indicate the consolidation of its borderland status.

The asymmetric nature of inter-regional relations is also manifest in the fact that while Horn of Africa states internalized Gulf rivalries (mostly to capitalize on them), the Gulf states did not show such tendencies (Cannon and Donelli 2020, 517; Marsai 2019, 89–90). However, that does not mean that the Horn RSC did not influence Gulf politics. The Horn of Africa states tried to capitalize on the export of rivalry in accordance with their self-interest, mostly in the form of hedging (Cannon and Donelli 2020, 509–510). This behavior did not create new patterns of conflict between the Gulf monarchies, but enlarged and intensified existing cleavages, mostly between Qatar and its neighbors.

1.3. The Effects of the Borderlandization on Somalia

To understand the effects and consequences for Somalia of the current Gulf Crisis, we should examine what types of linkages were present in the region and how they

changed after 2017; what the condition of the domestic Somali politics was when the crisis began and how the debate between the different Arab nations contributed to the (mis)understandings between local actors. First, we briefly examine the nature and history of Somali-Arab (Muslim) relations before June 2017.

1.3.1. The Somalis as Arabs

Somalia and the larger Horn of Africa sub-region have always maintained a close connection with the Arabian Peninsula. The early Abyssinian states came under significant cultural and economic influence from Southern Arabia, while the area of modern-day Yemen was occupied by the Kingdom of Axum in the sixth century (Marcus 2002, 6–12). Furthermore, according to the Somali national narrative, their ancestors arrived from the Arabian Peninsula and the founding fathers of their clans originated from the family of the Prophet – or at least from noble Arabian tribes (Lewis 2002, 5). Although anthropologists, linguists, and historians have questioned these Arab origins, the feeling of common roots should not be underestimated: Somalis do not consider themselves Africans, but Arabs, and this crystallizes in the so-called “national pride” and the feeling of superiority – and sometimes contempt – toward neighboring people, mainly those of Bantu origin (Interview C 2014; Interview D 2019). The Arab connection was also strengthened by the common religion, Islam, which helped to unify the different – and sometimes hostile – Somali clans in the past as well as in recent decades. Over the last 70 years, the concept of common Christian enemies (Abyssinia/Ethiopia; the colonizing powers of Great Britain, France, and Italy; Kenya; and later the AMISOM³ troop-contributing countries, Uganda and Burundi), the protection of sovereignty, the “threat of Christian crusaders,” and the “defense of the religion” have been the primary and most effective instruments of Somali nation and state building (Lewis 2002; Botha and Abdile 2014, 1–20; Interview E 2014). Mogadishu’s Arabic commitment is well represented by the fact that Somalia joined the Arab League in 1974 (Lewis 2002, 220). Although some members of the organization challenge – or forget – its presence in the Arab League (Interview F 2016), the importance of Somali membership was amply demonstrated when Mogadishu turned to the league to obtain diplomatic assistance in the Berbera port crisis (see later) (Allafrica 2018).

It must be emphasized that in the Somali historical narrative, the presence of foreign Muslim powers – the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries or Egypt in the nineteenth (Lewis 2002, 26–27, 41–42; International Crisis Group 2012) – were not considered as occupations, but as friendly connections based on coexistence (Wasuge 2016; Tesfanews 2017). This starkly contrasts with the approach toward Somalia’s two neighbors, Ethiopia and Kenya, and their roles in Somali history (Interview E 2014).

1.3.2. Somali – Arab Relations before 2017

Since its independence – and partly beforehand (Morone 2017, 109–122) – Somalia has built up relatively close relations with Arab and Muslim states. Nevertheless, during the Cold War era, the most important foreign actors in determining the fate of Somalia were the neighboring African states (Ethiopia and Kenya), the former colonizers (mainly the British and French), and the two superpowers. Arab nations played only an ad hoc and temporary role in Somali politics. Perhaps the only notable example is the Ogaden war, when Saudi Arabia offered significant money and compensation to Mogadishu for the

expulsion of Soviet advisors (Lewis 2002, 234). Yet it is questionable whether the Saudi offer was a decisive factor in the decision of the Somali leadership to attack Ethiopia.

Despite its efforts, Mogadishu could only play a secondary role in the region, and mainly served as the borderland of the African continent. The collapse of the Somali state in 1991 did not bring about significant change in the stance of Arab nations toward Mogadishu. Although some of them participated in the UN and American-led missions, their influence remained limited and was concentrated mainly on humanitarian and cultural issues.

The first visible political intervention by Arab nations in Somali cases in modern times took place during the formation of the Transitional National Government in 2000. During the so-called Arta Process in Djibouti, Gulf nations – mainly Saudi Arabia – played a significant role in building a Somali government (Lewis 2002, 294–300; Khalif 2003). The political involvement was accompanied by certain cultural and religious activities, which have been accused of leading to the spread of radical Jihadist – or at least Wahhabist – ideology in the Horn of Africa. These accusations were not baseless, in view of the fact that the Somali branch of the Saudi-based al-Haramain Islamic Foundation became sanctioned as a supporter of al-Qaeda by the UN Security Council (UN.org 2002) while employing numerous people who became prominent members of al-Shabaab, among them the deputy of the Jihadist organization, Mukhtar Robow (African Confidential 2017). Furthermore, with the emergence of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in Mogadishu in the early 2000s, support from the Gulf region – mainly across different non-governmental organizations – increased, stepping beyond the political sphere by working to wholly transform Somali society, focusing mainly on education, administration, and the judiciary (Menkhaus 2004, 52–65; Shay 2008, 22–27). According to different reports, the indoctrination of the Somali society was successful, primarily among the young generation, and while it did not imply the Jihadization of Somalis, many people in the region started to follow a more rigid interpretation of Islam (Interview G 2014; Hiiraan 2015, 2017; Interview B 2015),⁴ which also influenced their political visions and attitude toward foreign actors. The regular migration of the Somali labor force to and from the Gulf, mainly Saudi Arabia, also contributed to this ideological shift. The spread of fundamental Islamism significantly helped the shift of the Somali borderland from the neighboring African states toward the Gulf. Therefore, it was not accidental that African states – mainly Ethiopia – were suspicious of the developments in Somalia and decided to initiate a strong counteroffensive: first politically, with the establishment of the African-backed Transitional Federal Government, and later militarily when the Ethiopian army invaded its Eastern neighbor and destroyed the ICU in 2006.

Many authors (International Crisis Group 2008, 14; Hansen 2013, 49–72; Ingiriis 2018a, 2018b; Williams 2018, 31–55) have already analyzed how the Ethiopian military engagement contributed to the upsurge of al-Shabaab and the decision of thousands of Somalis to join the Jihadists, who were considered freedom fighters in the eyes of many locals. Additionally, the U.S.-backed move by Addis-Ababa signaled the beginning of an era of harsh competition for Somalia and its people between the African capitals and the Gulf states; while the former saw Mogadishu as a bridgehead for radical – and sometimes violent – Islamist ideologies and considered the Arabian influence as a direct security threat, the latter wanted to build a more comprehensive linkage with the Horn of Africa.

While Saudi engagement remained traditionally active, the 2000s brought about changes and the (re)emergence of old and new actors: the United Arab Emirates and Turkey. While Riyadh and the different Saudi groups (religious and charitable foundations) concentrated mainly on social and cultural issues, both Ankara and Abu Dhabi pursued a more complex agenda. The UAE placed massive emphasis on the geostrategic location of Somalia, which held both security and economic implications. First, Abu Dhabi had to mitigate the Somali piracy issue, which undermined the security of transportation in the Gulf of Aden and the wider West-Indian Ocean. Therefore, since 2011, the UAE has become the main supporter of the Puntland Maritime Police Force, which was organized to combat piracy both on the land and off the shores of Somalia (Garowe Online 2018). Furthermore, in 2014 Abu Dhabi reached a security agreement with Mogadishu to support the training of the Somali National Army (SNA) and to build the infrastructure for the SNA and the police within and beyond the capital (Mofa.gov.ae 2014; International Crisis Group 2018a, 11).

As it increased its military cooperation, the UAE started to build up a robust economic presence in the wider Horn of Africa, primarily in the form of large infrastructure projects. The flagship of the efforts was Dubai Port World (DP World), the predecessor of which was established in 1999 and within two decades became one of the biggest port management enterprises in the world. In 2018, DP World was operating in 78 different locations in 40 countries and its revenue reached 5.646 billion USD with a 1.270 billion dollar profit (DP World 2018). Although the company suffered serious setbacks in some cases (e.g. in Djibouti), in general it launched a successful regional expansion. In 2010, the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia (TFG) signed a ten-year contract with Dubai-based SKA Air and Logistics to manage the Aden Adde International Airport (Waryaport 2014). In 2013, Simatech Shipping LLC (also from Dubai) won a contract to launch container services for Mogadishu Seaport and expand the facilities with an investment of 70 million USD (Hiiran 2013).

Nevertheless, the efforts of Abu Dhabi were not without competitors. In the meantime, the new African policy toward Turkey gave an impetus to relations between the Horn of Africa and Ankara. Turkey mainly followed its own foreign policy agenda, which was even more complex than the Emirati one. The Turkish African Action Plan was accepted in 1998, but due to economic hardship, it remained inactive until 2005, which Ankara declared the “Year of Africa.” In the following years, there were numerous high-level meetings – including the Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit with 49 African delegations in 2008 – and rapid growth in common trade, while other forms of cooperation also emerged (Mfa.gov.tr 2019). The real breakthrough came during the Somali famine in 2011. Turkey acted quickly and sent a significant amount of humanitarian aid to the Horn of Africa. Furthermore, Turkey launched a strong campaign through diplomacy and the media to raise global awareness about the crisis. Ankara’s commitment was amply demonstrated by the visit of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his wife to Mogadishu at the peak of the famine. The Prime Minister was the first leader from outside Africa to come to the country in almost twenty years, generating an outpouring of emotion and enthusiasm among the Somalis for Turkey (BBC 2011; Interview C 2014; Wasuge 2016, 11).

In the subsequent years, Turkey built up a significant diplomatic and economic presence in Somalia. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) launched

numerous projects in parallel with other NGOs and the private sector. In contrast to other non-Africans, the Turks lived together with the Somalis and moved freely in Mogadishu. According to different estimates, hundreds of Turkish people worked and lived in Somalia (Interview C 2014) and Turkey became one of the biggest importers in Mogadishu by 2017 (Atlas Media 2017). However, it quickly became clear that not everybody was equally happy about of the increasing influence of Ankara. It is no surprise that there was reluctance in an African country, and this marked the first occurrence of increasing competition between the different Muslim nations emerging in current-day Somalia. The political, religious, and economic rivalry – accompanied by the later tensions between Muslim powers in the wider Middle East region – moved well beyond the Qatar crisis and had become obvious, at least by the time of the so-called Arab Spring and its aftermath. The rivalry quickly arrived in the Horn of Africa, and it (soon) became one of the most important areas for this antagonism.

For the Emirates, Turkey beginning to play a more robust role in Somali domestic politics was perceived as a challenge, primarily evidenced in the dialogue between Mogadishu and separatist Somaliland. However, what caused further grievances for Abu Dhabi was the increasing influence of Turkish businesses in the capital. In September 2013, the Turkish company Favori LLC took over management operations of Mogadishu's Aden Adde International Airport from Dubai-based SKA Air and Logistic (Allafrica 2013) and built a new terminal. Two years later, the Turkish Albayrak Group also won the contract to run operations in the Mogadishu seaport (Daily Sabah 2015). The two facilities accounted for the largest part of the Somali government's official revenue, so changing the management from Emirates companies to Turkish ones implied issues beyond the economic spectrum.

In addition to Turkey, another country with strong pro-Muslim Brotherhood ideological background, Qatar, started to build up a presence in Mogadishu. Doha used its charitable organizations and its powerful media, Al Jazeera, to exert influence in the Horn of Africa. The activity of the tiny Gulf state and its institutions faced contradictions and criticism, mainly concerning its alleged connections with al-Shabaab. Even though the leaders of this Jihadist organization were on terrorist lists and various actors undertook serious intelligence activity in the hopes of locating and eliminating them, reporters with Al Jazeera conducted numerous interviews with members of the group (Al Jazeera 2013). The increasing influence of different pro-Muslim Brotherhood religious groups – Damul Jadid, Aala Sheekh, al-Ictisaam, and Al-Islah – on Somali politics did not help to mitigate the concerns of neighboring African and Western nations, along with fellow Arab countries (Bryden 2013, 3–8).

The borderlandization of Somalia by the Gulf meant not only that the country shifted toward the Gulf as a borderland, but also that the rivalry between different Muslim nations was imported into the country, which deeply affected local politics and stability. Nevertheless, a more or less peaceful coexistence was maintained initially. As we previously highlighted, Abu Dhabi entered into a security cooperation agreement with Mogadishu in 2014 that maintained support for the Somali security sector. One year later, Somalia was ready to back the Saudi-led coalition and offered its land, territorial waters, and airspace for military operations (Ahmed 2015). Furthermore, according to diplomatic sources, Saudi Arabia and the UAE hired 3,000 Somali troops with the agreement of the President of Somalia, Hasan Mohamud, to support their campaign

(Interview H 2018). In early 2016, when Arab nations launched a joint diplomatic offensive against Iran, Somalia was among the Muslim nations that cut diplomatic ties with Tehran (News24 2016). On the one hand, these examples demonstrate the ability of Mogadishu to act as a partner with all parties while avoiding unmanageable antagonism between the different actors, even as rivalry increased. On the other hand, the close cooperation between the Arab capitals and the Somali government also shows the deep borderlandization of the country.

1.3.3. The Qatar Crisis and the Break

The year 2017 brought two significant events that would fundamentally change the complex networks of allegiances in the Horn of Africa. The first was the election of Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed Farmajo as the President of Somalia; the second was the Gulf crisis.

The electoral process in 2016–2017 was burdened by corruption, bribery, and intervention by foreign nations; greatly jeopardizing the credibility of both the ruling Somali elites and of the international community. Before the election, the two most prominent candidates were the previous president, Hasan Mohamud, and his last prime minister, Ali Sharmarke. According to diplomatic sources and articles, Hasan Mohamud was supported by Turkey and Ethiopia, while Sharmarke was favored by the Emirates and Kenya (CRDC Digest 2017; Interview I 2017). Nevertheless, the election brought a surprise similar to that of 2012, and Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed Farmajo, a previous prime minister in 2010–2011, won the presidency in February 2017.

The election of Farmajo contributed to the deteriorating relationship with many Gulf countries for two main reasons. First, the new president launched a strong nationalist campaign against all foreign intervention in his country, which he said endangered Somalia's independence and sovereignty. Although Ethiopia was the main target of these remarks, many Somalis also became more suspicious of, if not increasingly hostile toward, the influence of Gulf States. Second, after the election, more and more reports were published about the linkage between Farmajo and Qatar. According to the rumors, the president had been given financial support for his campaign from Doha (International Crisis Group 2018a). Furthermore, he appointed officials with close connections to different Qatari ministries and agencies, for example, the head of Farmajo's cabinet – and later the deputy leader of the Somali National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) – Fahad Yasin, had previously served as the chief correspondent of Al Jazeera in Mogadishu (Radio Dalsan 2017) and some reports suggested that he was the main broker of Qatari funds for the president's campaign (Suna Times 2017; Interview J 2019).

At the beginning, it seemed that neither party wanted ties to be broken. Nevertheless, the outbreak of the Gulf crisis in June 2017 left Mogadishu with few feasible options: the borderlandization imported the debate into Somalia. The Saudi-led coalition wanted Somalia to commit to their support, as it had done during the Yemeni War and the diplomatic row with Iran. Yet Somalia chose neutrality – not independent of the fact that according to different reports, Doha offered more financial support to Mogadishu than the quartet (Haaretz 2019).

The decision of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) was interpreted by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi as Mogadishu betraying their common efforts and instead backing the

pro-Brotherhood alliance. Saudi Arabia temporarily suspended its financial aid to Somalia (Sheikh 2017), but the long-term reaction of the UAE was more devastating. The diplomats of the Emirates put constant pressure on their Somali colleagues to cut ties with Qatar and Turkey, while the latter two offered significant support for Mogadishu: in November 2017, Doha signed a 200 million USD contract with Somalia to build two roads in the country (Qatar Tribune 2017). In the meantime, Farmajo's cabinet – which had a strong pro-Qatari and pro-Turkey stance – blamed Abu Dhabi for intervening in domestic Somali politics and trying to jeopardize the power of the FGS. As highlighted in the analysis published by the Crisis Group, the accusation of being the Trojan horse of the UAE became a sharp and controversial weapon in the hands of the government against its critics and opposition (International Crisis Group 2018a, 8).

It is unlikely that the parties really wanted such deep friction, but the situation escalated quickly because neither side was ready to step back and seek a compromise. Furthermore, Somali politicians did not understand why the UAE was questioning their neutrality in the debate while Abu Dhabi had accepted similar statements, for example, from Addis Ababa (International Crisis Group 2018a, 5). The Somalis – as regularly in their history – did not appreciate the foreign pressure on them.

The clash between Mogadishu and Abu Dhabi concentrated on three focal points: the attack against prominent opposition politicians, the Berbera port deal, and the meddling of the UAE in the relations between the FGS and the federal member states (FMSs). First, during the late 2017 to early 2018 period, prominent Somali politicians were sidelined because of their supposed links to the Emirates. Among those targeted were the speaker of the parliament and a harsh critic of Farmajo, Osman Jawari, who was forced to resign; the mayor of Mogadishu and former ally of the President, Thabit Abdi Mohammed, who also stepped down; and the senator Abdi Hasan Awale Qeybdiid and opposition leader Abdirahman Abdishakur Warsame, whose houses were raided by the security forces, during which five of the latter's bodyguards were killed (Interview K 2018). It must be underlined that these incidents took place not only because of the Gulf crisis; all of them had other – probably more significant – causes. For instance, the military raids against Qeybdiid and Warsame were definitely part of a wider clan struggle for control of Mogadishu, the aim of which was to weaken the position of the powerful Hawiye/Habir Gedir clan in the capital (Interview L 2018). On the other hand, Thabit was forced out because his ideas about an autonomous federal member state in the Benadir region – including Mogadishu – would have significantly decreased the control of the federal government over the capital and its revenues (International Crisis Group 2018a, 9–10). Nevertheless, in each case the accusation of an Emirates' link covered the real intention, further exacerbating the tension between the parties.

The second point was the Berbera port deal, which angered not only the FGS but the whole Somali society. Indeed, it is hard to understand why Abu Dhabi chose such a strong message toward Mogadishu to make it clear that the UAE was powerful enough to bypass the FGS – and the sovereignty of the country – and act independently on such a sensitive issue. The move affirmed criticism made with regard to the intervention of the Emirates in the Horn of Africa, creating a solid foundation for the critics who accused Abu Dhabi of damaging the territorial integrity of Somalia.

Somaliland, which has functioned as a *de facto* independent state since 1991 but has not received official recognition from any nations, quickly sided with the Saudi coalition

during the Gulf crisis when it declared it would ban Qatar Airways from using its airspace. Hargeisa recognized that Somaliland's geostrategic position and the critical need for its ports and airports during the Yemeni war gave him a unique chance to strengthen his position in the international theater. In this aspect, at least in the short term, borderlandization represented a positive opportunity for Somaliland to improve its position in the region.

To be accurate, it must be emphasized that negotiations between Dubai Port World and the government of Somaliland concerning the management of the Berbera seaport began before the Gulf crisis, and the first media reports outlining the framework of the potential agreement (costs, construction data, etc.) were revealed far before the Qatari case (Hiiraan 2016; Global Construction Review 2017). In 2017, Puntland also signed a contract with P&O Ports, another Emirates company, for the management of Bossasso port (Garowe Online 2015). Additionally, in 2016 the negotiations between Mogadishu and Hargeisa restarted with the mediation of Turkey and the UK (International Crisis Group 2018a, 17).

It is possible that the action taken by DP World was aimed at breaking the re-engagement between the two entities. Regardless, in March 2018, DP World signed a contract with the Government of Somaliland for the management of the port. The 442 million USD agreement outlined the plan of the Dubai-based company to expand the port yard by 250,000 square meters and to modernize its facilities. The capacity of the port, which was around 150,000 TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units), will expand to 450,000 TEUs on completion of the development. The project also includes an economic free-trade zone and a 100 million USD road construction connecting Berbera with Wajaale in Ethiopia. The Emirates company had a 51 percent stake in the Berbera port, while the government of Somaliland owned 30 percent. Furthermore, Ethiopia seized a 19 percent share, which also fueled the anger of Mogadishu (The National 2018).

The development of the Berbera commercial port was not the only deal between Hargeisa and Abu Dhabi. The UAE also began to develop a military base – both air and seaport – for its own purposes of training the police, the army, and the coastguard of Somaliland in 2017 (Cornwell 2018). Ultimately, the final straw that broke the camel's back was the deal that concerned the commercial port. Mogadishu launched a strong diplomatic offensive and implored the Arab League to neglect the deal, with limited success.

The case of Somaliland amply demonstrates the third challenge for Mogadishu, which was caused by foreign engagement in the Horn of Africa. Specifically, that Abu Dhabi and its allies had the potential (which was utilized) to strengthen their position against Mogadishu with the support of the federal member states. The member states were always ready to increase their power and jeopardize the authority of the FGS, which was only the representative of some Murusade and the Marehan sub-clans in their eyes, and they could expect to derive some benefits for their rebellion from outside actors. The best example of this behavior was the declaration by the Hirshabelle, Galmudug, and Puntland states, in which they criticized the neutrality of the FGS in the Qatar crisis and pledged their support for the Saudi coalition (Akwei 2017). The step was not only unconstitutional (the FGS has the right to shape Somali foreign policy), but also elicited accusations that the FMSs were receiving financial support for this move.⁵ The actions of the UAE, at least in the case of the Berbera port deal, openly bypassed the FGS, jeopardizing the credibility of Abu Dhabi and supporting the accusation that the Emirates were destabilizing fragile Somali politics.

In April 2018, the FGS decided to hit back. First, FGS officials confiscated 9.6 million USD of cash at the Mogadishu International airport from an Emirates plane en route to Puntland. Abu Dhabi argued that the money was the salaries for the Puntland Maritime Police Forces, but Mogadishu stated that the aim of the Emirates was to finance Garowe's political resistance against the FGS (International Crisis Group 2018a, ii). In response, Abu Dhabi ceased its military cooperation with Mogadishu in the subsequent days and also suspended its humanitarian activities in the country. A sad consequence of the break occurred on 23 April, when the Somali National Army raided the previous military camp of the UAE to disarm the Emirates-trained troops. The move led to fierce clashes between the different groups and the Emirates-trained soldiers were forced to run for their lives. The SNA looted the camp, and some of the weapons later appeared on the black market (Sheikh and Omar 2018a, 2018b).

1.3.4. *The Years of Cold Peace on the Horn 2018–2019*

After the armed clashes in Mogadishu, many diplomats and experts were anxious about the possible further escalation of the conflict and the increasing potential for a proxy war in Somalia. Turkey continued building its military training camp, and some sources stated that Qatar was providing financial aid for Mogadishu after the split. The armed confrontation between Somaliland and Puntland around Tukaraq town only fueled these concerns (International Crisis Group 2018b). Although the clashes seemed to be a local clan issue, the increasing power of Hargeisa and the foreign training of its army offered the opportunity for an armed solution to the prolonged territorial dispute between the two entities. However, one and a half years after the break, the parties averted the deepening of the crisis; not independent of the fact that we can also see some cautious *rapprochement* between the Gulf states that – in the framework of borderlandization – also contributed to taming the passions in the Horn of Africa. Although the Emirates stopped the training of the SNA, they maintained diplomatic relations with Mogadishu. In June 2018, Abu Dhabi delivered food assistance to the victims of the drought in Jubaland (Reliefweb 2018). P&O Ports also continued their activities in Bossaso port (Goodjoog 2019). Nevertheless, there was no sign of a new Emirates initiative with the FGS.

The reason for the lack of any development stemmed not only from the behavior of the parties, but also from the changing geopolitics of the Horn of Africa. In April 2018, the new Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, was inaugurated. The new leader radically transformed the bilateral relations in the Horn of Africa by concluding a peace agreement with Eritrea and beginning to build a cordial relationship with Mogadishu. Saudi Arabia and the UAE were among the most important foreign supporters of Abiy. For example, Abu Dhabi provided a 3 billion USD aid and investment package to Addis Ababa to prevent the bankruptcy of the hegemonic power of the Horn of Africa (Maasho 2018). Saudi Arabia also hosted the Eritrea-Ethiopia peace agreement (Arabian Business 2018). As a result of these circumstances, Somalia received less attention. Furthermore, it seemed that Mogadishu managed to profit from the leadership change in Addis Ababa. According to diplomatic sources, the most important request Farmajo made to Abiy was to have more control in the federal member states' elections, to help the selection and election of politicians who were ready to accept – or at least did not directly attack – the FGS (Interview J 2019). The alleged role of the Ethiopian army in

the arrest of Muhktar Robow, the prominent anti-Farmajo candidate for the Presidency of Interim South-West Administration, supported the narrative of an agreement between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa (Africa News 2018).

It is almost impossible to verify the truth behind these accusations and rumors. Nevertheless, it is obvious that after the harsh debates – and actually the split of the relationship – between the FMSs and the FGS, the last elections in the member states (in ISWA, in Puntland, and even in JIA) brought acceptable results for the Farmajo government, since the people elected presidents who at least did not seek further confrontation and were ready to cooperate. Furthermore, it is also apparent that in the last few months, the critical statements by the FMSs softened. After the re-election of Ahmed Madobe in JIA, which Farmajo could not foil, the situation became more stable.

2. Conclusion

As a result of the above-described developments, the Horn of Africa can be regarded more and more as a borderland of the Gulf region. The borderlandization process comprised two elements: first, political and security relationship building accompanied by economic incentives, and second, ideological approximation through transnational ties. The phenomenon has also taken place via two breaking points: the Iranian-Saudi rivalry and the Gulf rift.

As a result, the Gulf rift of 2017 had a severe effect on domestic and regional stability; a process that is readily apparent in the case of Somalia. The intensifying competition between Qatar and the Quartet could easily jeopardize the fragile Somali state, as factionalism and division are so deeply embedded in Somali politics that it creates an opportunity for local groups to employ the support of foreign actors to maximize their influence and power. The Somali elite (organized mainly along clan lines) consider the political struggle to be a zero-sum game, making political compromise almost impossible. Therefore, different entities turned to foreign supporters in an effort to prolong the fragmentation and ensure they could maintain their local power vis-à-vis Mogadishu. Unfortunately, many countries were ready to back this rivalry, and the Gulf crisis only widened the gap between the parties. Turkey and Qatar built up close relationships with Hasan Mohamud and Mohamed Farmajo, while the Emirates and Saudi Arabia forged strong linkages with Puntland, Jubbaland, and most importantly, Somaliland. In the latter case, the meddling of the UAE was obvious and was destructive. Nevertheless, the influence of Doha and Ankara was also unacceptable to many Somalis. As statehood and a common sentiment among the Somali nation are still lacking, even with the best intentions there is no possibility of neutral intervention, since each entity and organization belongs to particular clans and/or religious groups in the country, and the involvement of foreign actors threatens the status quo.

Through the analysis of the Horn of Africa's emergence as a borderland of the Gulf region, it is possible to make general observations concerning the process. First, borderlandization has taken place through the export of conflicts at two levels (interstate and transnational), as well as by using both political-economic incentives and ideological tools. Second, the process has caused instability; not only in the region, but also in specific countries (see the case of Somalia). Third, it has not taken place through coercion; local actors took part willingly, mostly motivated by short-term profits.

Naturally, these observations only apply to the case of the Horn of Africa. Nevertheless, they could imply more general attributes of the borderlandization process. In order to conceptualize this better, further studies should be made in similar regions, where normative and political approximation has taken place in relation to another region.

Notes

1. Throughout the paper, we use the traditional definition of both regions. In the case of the Horn of Africa, we include Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia, and for the Gulf region, we consider the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (namely Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar) and Iran.
2. By the Qatari crisis, we refer to the political conflict between Qatar on the one hand and on the other, the camp led by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain (the “Quarter”) over the foreign policy activities of Doha, especially in connection with cooperating with Iran and subsidizing the Muslim Brotherhood network. Though tensions were visible between the two sides for decades, they led to the suspension of bilateral diplomatic ties between Qatar and the aforementioned states in 2017, a crisis yet to be resolved. For further information, see e.g., Pradhan 2018.
3. The African Union Mission in Somalia, deployed in 2007.
4. This was also supported by an interview conducted by Viktor Marsai with a former UN employee in Nairobi, February 2014.
5. Electronic interview with a UN expert conducted by Viktor Marsai in September 2017.

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