



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

## **15<sup>th</sup> Gulf Research Meeting**

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### **Workshop No. 7**

## **Power Relations between the GCC and the Horn of Africa in an Uncertain World**

### **1. Directors**

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### **2. Abstract**

The recent shift towards multipolarity - the rise of BRICS and other middle powers - and the impending crises due to climate change mean that global dynamics have become more complex, supply chains more uncertain, and regional integration more unpredictable. Unidirectional flows of labour and capital, bi-directional flows of trade, and unbalanced power and security relations have characterised the GCC and Horn of Africa's long-standing relationships since the 1970s. How these relationships change in the future is important for both regions, as GCC countries embark on economic diversification in response to a decarbonising world and countries in the Horn of Africa strive to adapt to the inevitably negative impacts of climate change on people and development. This workshop will focus on the connections across this vast region which is usually studied separately as the Gulf and Sub-Saharan Africa, and will look at ways in which security, trade and labour relationships reproduce inequalities across the region. The workshop will bring together interdisciplinary scholars working across African studies and Middle Eastern studies in economics, political science, anthropology, and history. The goal is to foster science diplomacy that can lead to deliberative policy making - particularly addressing the potential impacts of the climate crisis and regional instability - that considers the interest of the region as a whole.

### 3. Context

The Red Sea is one of the most neglected regions of the world in contemporary scholarship. While there has been a marked increase in studies on the history of bodies of water (for example, see the recent growth of scholarship on the Indian Ocean), the Red Sea as a region remains largely invisible (Wick, 2016). Yet, the crises spanning the Red Sea and tying the region together are more visible today (Carson, et al., 2024). This calls for a return to the study of the Red Sea region and the deep patterns of its interconnection and conflict.

There is a long history of trade between the two regions on either side of the Red Sea, with agricultural commodities and livestock being the two most traded goods. Today, several economies in the Horn of Africa are heavily reliant on these relationships. For example, most of Somalia's livestock exports go to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, Sudan's trading volume with Saudi Arabia exceeded \$5 billion in 2017, and Saudi Arabia is Ethiopia's second largest foreign investor (Ding, 2024). Moreover, GCC's heavy reliance on migrant labour poses unique challenges. While there's some overlap between the skills required in the green energy sector and the hydrocarbon sector (Lim et al. 2023), some GCC countries have committed to large retraining programs, indicating that a shift in the labour market is likely. Since the 1970s, the supply of skilled and unskilled labour from East Africa to the GCC has increased. This has depleted the labour supply in East African countries and East African economies have become increasingly reliant on remittances from the Arabian peninsula. This labour has also become a pillar of the economic miracle witnessed in the GCC since the 1970s.

More recently, GCC countries have sought to strengthen their security presence and have adopted a more interventionist approach across the sea. This was done for several reasons, but primarily to balance out Iran's presence in the Red Sea and to compete for influence amongst each other (Ding, 2024). In addition to development aid flows from the GCC to the Horn of Africa, which includes concessional loans and grants for schools, roads and hospitals, several GCC countries are keen on long-term management contracts for ports and other critical infrastructure, especially in Djibouti, Somalia and Sudan. Given power imbalances and economic inequality across the Red Sea, it's unclear whether cooperation in this area will be mutually beneficial. Moreover, the current debt crisis is likely to make countries in the Horn more vulnerable (Were, 2024) to unbalanced cooperation agreements and extractive foreign direct investment. For example, Sub-Saharan African countries, including those in the Horn of Africa, are being pressured by international and development organisations to commodify land in order to service their debts (Hanieh, 2024).

The multiple areas where the GCC is entangled with the Horn of Africa are set to change in the future due to climate change and geopolitical realities. Climate change is forcing GCC countries to diversify away from fossil fuel dependence and is expected to drive already indebted countries in the Horn of Africa into further fiscal crises.

This workshop aims to build on work previously conducted by the organisers focusing on climate change, political economy and connectivity in the Red Sea region (Red Sea Net, nd.). The Red Sea Net project brought together scholars from across the region and included a large-scale survey studying perceptions of the risks posed by climate change and willingness to act across seven countries in the Red Sea area (Red Sea Net, 2024). During the 2020-2021 academic year, this network also organized a speaker series featuring fourteen presenters from countries surrounding the Red Sea basin.

#### 4. Focus/Objectives

The Red Sea region, spanning East Africa to the Arabian Peninsula, is one of the most unequal in the world. Marked by vast disparities in security and wealth, the region is home to fragile states, newly sovereign states, and oil-rich states with some of the highest per capita incomes in the world. Despite these differences, the region faces common environmental and socio-economic challenges, exacerbated by drought and desertification, water scarcity, and low levels of food self-sufficiency. The region is also increasingly connected through the growing military, political, and economic presence of Gulf States in the Horn of Africa and through mutual dependency on transnational labor and remittances.

This workshop will focus on connections across the vast Red Sea region, which is usually the focus of two separate area studies, mainly Gulf studies and Sub-Saharan African studies. The choice of topics aims to shed light on the inequalities inherent in the economic, trade and security relationships between countries across the Red Sea. The workshop will particularly focus on trade relationships and who benefits from the current arrangements; the impacts of food security in the GCC region on the environment and food security considerations in the Horn of Africa; labour migration patterns and interdependencies; and potential areas of cooperation that will support sustainable development on both sides of the sea. The workshop will also focus on identity formation across the Red Sea - an area that has received little attention in the past - and how the increased connectivity leads to the expression of new identities (Hall, 2006).

The objectives of the workshop are threefold. First, we hope to bring attention to the dynamic nature of the relationships between countries in the Red Sea region. These relationships are constantly evolving and are likely to change in the future due to global shifts in energy markets and the multiple geopolitical crises in the region. Second, we aim to bring together researchers from different academic disciplines studying GCC-Sub-Saharan African relations broadly defined. The purpose of this convening is to emphasize the importance of looking at the Red Sea as a historically unified region characterised by economic and political diversity. Finally, we intend to highlight the dynamics in the region to bring about more cooperative relationships in the future, first between academics - through science diplomacy - and potentially between policymakers. Climate change will impact populations on both sides of the Red Sea, albeit in different ways and with varying intensities. But impacts on one side will have reverberating effects on the other.

#### 5. References

- Lim, J. et al. 2023. Location is a major barrier for transferring US fossil fuel employment to green jobs. *Nature Communications* 14: 5711.
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- Ding, L. 2024. The Evolving Roles of the Gulf States in the Horn of Africa. *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 18(1): 1-14.
- Hall, Stuart. "New ethnicities." Stuart Hall. Routledge, 2006. 453-462
- Hanieh, A. 2024. Laundering Carbon-The Gulf's 'New Scramble for Africa'. *Middle East Research and Information Project. MER Issue 311: Post-Fossil Politics.*
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- Wick, Alexis, The Red Sea: In Search of Lost Space (University of California Press, 2016)
- Were, M. 2024. Emerging public debt challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa. UNU WIDER Working Paper 2024/36.

## 6. Papers Focus/Topics

- Are trade relationships balanced, and who benefits from existing trade?
- Have racial, ethnic and national identities shifted as a result of the increased interaction and migration across the Red Sea since the 1970s?
- How do the new diasporas, which span the Red Sea region, imagine the area?
- The impacts of food trade on food security considerations across the Red Sea
- The impact of climate change on labour migration across the Red Sea
- Economic cooperation, infrastructure development and technology transfer between the GCC and the Horn of Africa
- Pathways through which the GCC can support climate change adaptation in the Horn of Africa
- What are the opportunities and limitations of the commodification of land for carbon credits in the Horn of Africa
- How do transnational security concerns impact the stability of the Red Sea region?
- What are the impacts of non-state actors in the Red Sea region? How do they facilitate or challenge regional integration?

## 7. Paper Structure, Referencing, and Format

Authors should refer to the [GRM Paper Guidelines](#).

## 8. Publication Plans

We will approach the Journal of East African Studies to publish a special issue titled ‘The GCC and the Horn of Africa in an Uncertain World.’ We will aim to publish the issue in January 2026.

The special issue will be structured as follows:

Title: The GCC and the Horn of Africa in an Uncertain World

Introduction

Economic cooperation and trade between the GCC and the Horn of Africa

Labour migration and interdependence

Foreign direct investment, remittances and Horn of Africa diaspora in the GCC

Food security across the Red Sea region

Race, ethnicity and national identities among labour migrants in the GCC region

Climate change, environmental degradation and carbon markets

Security and stability in the Red Sea region

Cooperation, economic development and mutual adaptation to climate change

Papers that cannot fit in with the joint publication will be considered for publication individually in a journal or as a GRC paper, under the guidance of the workshop directors.

## 9. Directors’ Bio Notes

**Muez Ali** is a Senior Research and Policy Associate at Earthna: Center for a Sustainable Future at Qatar Foundation, an Honorary Research Fellow at the Bartlett School of Environment, Energy and Resources at UCL, and Adjunct Professor at Georgetown University, Qatar. His research activities and interests span food security, climate change in the MENA region and Sub-Saharan Africa, electrification and energy access, and the political economy of knowledge production and development. On Sudan, his research focuses on social and economic policy, and civil society and governance. He has a PhD in Energy and Economics from University College London.

**Alden Young** is an associate professor of History and Global Affairs at Yale University. He is a political and economic historian of Africa and the Middle East. He has written extensively about Sudan, and he is currently working on a number of research projects that examine the connections between the Gulf states on the Horn of Africa. Alden is also writing a book on post-partition conflicts in the Horn of Africa (e.g., Sudan-South Sudan and Ethiopia-Eritrea) with political scientist Michael Woldemariam. Alden comes to Yale from UCLA where he was an associate professor of African American Studies at UCLA and a standing member of the faculty in the International Institute. Before that he taught for five years in the History Department at Drexel University. He has been a fellow of the Berggruen Institute and a member of the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. He is the author of *Transforming Sudan: Decolonization Economic Development and State Formation* (Cambridge University Press 2017), paperback release 2020. He has published numerous academic journals and writes frequently in popular forums like *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and *Noema Magazine*.