



MADOUKH AJMI AL-OTAIBI, *al-Qarn al-Afrīqī 'Umqan Istrātijīyyan Khalījīyyan* [*The Horn of Africa: A Strategic Depth for Gulf States*] (Doha: Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2021), pp. 230.

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The geopolitical location of the Horn of Africa overlooking the Bab-el-Mandeb strait – a crucial maritime passage for 12% of global trade – has positioned it as a theatre for the intervention of dominant international powers at multiple junctures during the colonial period: first the Portuguese, followed by the Italians and French, and then the British.

Madoukh Ajmi al-Otaibi's *The Horn of Africa: A Strategic Depth for Gulf States* addresses the multifaceted relationship between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

states and the countries of the Horn of Africa. It posits that the states of the Horn of Africa could play a significant role in enhancing the strategic depth of the Gulf, driven by geopolitical considerations, shared historical and cultural ties, mutual interests in promoting security and stability, and an increase in the volume of investments. The book covers the period from 2001 to 2018, a time when the presence and influence of Arab Gulf states in the Horn of Africa expanded perceptibly.

Al-Otaibi argues that, with the rise of Islam, the geographical proximity of both regions facilitated the expansion of Arab influence into the heart of the African continent through its eastern coast. This connection strengthened the ties between the peoples in the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula and those in East Africa, as clearly observed in Zanzibar, which was a key trading post for Arabs.¹ The author highlights the reciprocal waves of migration and political ties from the pre-Islamic period and onward. He cites the mediation of the Abyssinian chiefs in disputes among pre-Islamic Arab tribes, the migration of the Prophet's Companions to Abyssinia amid growing hostility from his own Quraysh tribe, as well as the assistance sought from the Sultan of Oman by the tribal leaders of Mogadishu, who turned to him for support against increasing Portuguese pressure, given his command of the most powerful navy in the East at the time. Additionally, the book discusses intermarriages between Arabs and Africans, linguistic similarity among speakers of Hamitic and Cushitic languages such as Somali, and Semitic languages such as Arabic, Amharic, and Tigrinya, as well as the religious continuity that spanned both regions. Indeed, the three Abrahamic faiths travelled to Africa through the Arabian Peninsula and left a major imprint on the civilization of the Horn of Africa.²

Al-Otaibi draws significantly on the ideas of Ali Mazrui, a Kenyan intellectual of Arab descent, particularly his concept of "Afrabia". The theoretical model offers valuable insights for developing relations between the Arab Gulf and the Horn of Africa, grounded in shared geography, history, and social dynamics, which align with the principle of strategic depth.³ The author contends that culture and language are essential

¹ Madoukh Ajmi al-Otaibi, *al-Qarn al-Afrīqī 'Umqan Istrātijīyyan Khalījīyyan* (Doha: Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2021), p. 30.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 31-35.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-40.

components of soft power within “the Gulf’s strategic depth project in the Horn of Africa”. He emphasizes the importance of religious congruence, linguistic overlap, and the influence of Arabic literature on East African culture through various stories and popular proverbs.⁴

The “Gulf strategic depth project” undoubtedly faces significant internal and external challenges.⁵ Internally, the Horn of Africa grapples with legitimacy, integration, participation, and the equitable distribution of wealth and power. The growing influence of tribes and their laws, coupled with authoritarian governments, exacerbates these challenges. This inadequacy of regimes in addressing urgent social, political, and economic problems is evident in the persistent wars between and within countries of the Horn, and the rise of ethnic-based separatism.⁶ However, the Arab Gulf states cannot easily navigate the internal challenges in the Horn of Africa, particularly as they lack a political model that can be exported, just as Western powers (as opposed to Russia and China) do with their democratic model.

External challenges to the strategic depth project, according to al-Otaibi, include the global perception of terrorism, which has led the United States to establish a strong security presence in the region. This includes intensive maritime patrols to oversee US and European warships along the Somali coast, the establishment of a military base in Djibouti to monitor conditions in the Horn region and East Africa, and the creation of the “Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism” in Somalia. In contrast, France’s approach emphasizes the interconnection between security and development, focusing on military support to foster stability in African states through economic ties.⁷ These challenges raise critical questions about the ability of Arab Gulf states to take on the responsibility of securing straits, maritime corridors, and the long coastline of East Africa.

Al-Otaibi holds that the capitalist economic order should be leveraged in alignment with the Gulf’s strategic depth in the Horn of Africa. Despite the major political and economic transformations Africa has undergone since the late 20th century, these developments have led to a new mode of governance dubbed “Afrocracy”. It retains the legacy of totalitarian, autocratic rule, which global capitalism supports to further its interests.⁸ Al-Otaibi advocates for a capitalist model that would enable Gulf states to assert their influence in the Horn of Africa, potentially rivalling the Western model. Furthermore, a strategic Gulf presence in the Horn could complement the existing US/Western presence through coordination. Gulf states could benefit as “free riders”, taking advantage of American protection of the waters of the Horn to quietly establish their influence. This approach allows them to avoid directly clashing with US/Western influence, and to evade the burdens of military protection and economic support in a region marred by crisis and famine.

Al-Otaibi discusses what he terms “the Gulf political will toward the Horn of Africa”, focusing on issues of conflict, security, development, and investment climate 2001 and 2018,⁹ evident in the Gulf states’ proactive efforts to resolve conflicts in the region, for instance in Sudan and Somalia. Qatar played a significant role in conflict resolution in Sudan by sponsoring a peace agreement between the Sudanese government and armed groups in Darfur, culminating in the 2013 Doha agreement. Likewise, Kuwait demonstrated its commitment by supporting a \$3.5 billion project to develop East Sudan. These Qatari and Kuwaiti efforts were welcomed and praised by other GCC states.¹⁰

⁴ Ibid., pp. 53-55.

⁵ Ibid., p. 42.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 43-44.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 47-48.

⁸ Ibid., p. 48.

⁹ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

Moreover, the Gulf states have ascribed great emphasis to resolving the perpetual conflicts and civil wars in Somalia. In 2017, Saudi Arabia hosted Somali factions in Jeddah, successfully persuading them to sign a peace agreement. In fact, the GCC has consistently invited these groups to settle their disputes on multiple occasions, including Saudi conflict resolution efforts between Sudan and Chad in 2007 through the Janadriyah Agreement signed in Riyadh, as well as the 2018 Jeddah peace summit aimed at reconciling Ethiopia and Eritrea.¹¹

Conversely, the Gulf states have prioritized social security, which is an important dimension in al-Otaibi's argument regarding their political will toward the Horn of Africa. He incorporates social exchange theory to analyse the establishment of peace and social security among GCC states and the Horn. The concept centres on relief work and funding for development and reconstruction projects, which the author refers to as "the voluntary humanitarian action of the Gulf states toward the Horn of Africa". Additionally, it encompasses economic agreements, commercial exchanges, and investments.¹²

The author poses a key question: How do leaders and elites in the Horn countries perceive the voluntary action of Gulf states? To provide an answer, he conducted interviews and surveys with 200 experts from a sample of academic and political elites.¹³ He argues that the strategic mindsets of leaders and elites vary from country to country according to Gulf States' interaction with conflicts in the region. However, there is a consensus among them in recognizing and accepting the role of Gulf states as peace brokers in internal and external conflicts within the Horn of Africa.¹⁴ However, while these elites acknowledge the tangible charitable and humanitarian initiatives, they do not find them commensurate with the scale and financial power of the Gulf states. Additionally, the magnitude of Gulf wealth is perceived as disproportionate to the scale of Gulf states' investments in the region.¹⁵

Al-Otaibi's book fills a significant gap in the scholarship on Arab-African relations, which has primarily focused on North Africa and the Nile Basin, often overlooking the Gulf. The book, however, does not explore in depth the potential advantages of recent academic interest in Indian Ocean studies, which posits shared cultural connections between the western Indian Ocean and the Gulf. These ties are rooted not merely in trade, but in the "idea" of a common world linking the harbours of the Arab Gulf, East Africa, and India.

The book provides great potential for further research and reflection. Perhaps the starting point should be investigating whether the Gulf states function as a cohesive bloc with harmonious long-term perceptions and goals, or if their engagement is overshadowed by country-level concerns. Several issues warrant consideration: the history of the Western Indian Ocean, particularly the close ties between the Gulf States and the Horn of Africa and how the colonial period has undermined these connections; the water conflict between Egypt (integral to the Gulf's strategic depth) and Ethiopia, a thorny issue for the Horn of Africa; the expansion of armed groups in Yemen and the influence of sub-state actors in the Horn of Africa, along with external factors given the region's proximity to the Bab-el-Mandeb; the impact of the 2017 Gulf crisis on the shared "political will" of Gulf states toward the Horn; and the Gulf states' location on the map of growing regional and international competition in the Horn, particularly from countries like Turkey and Iran.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 65-66.

¹² Ibid., p. 70.

¹³ Ibid., p. 117.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 127, 187.