



STRATEGIC CONTAGION SERIES

THE GULF, SOMALIA AND WHAT COMES NEXT?

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Somalia—a country strategically located along the Horn of Africa—has become a pivot in the unfolding Gulf rivalry. It is being prodded to choose a side and join either the Qatar-Turkey bloc or the UAE-Saudi bloc. Such pressures exacerbate existing tensions within Somalia and the Gulf crisis' spill-over threatens Somalia's fragile balance.

Officially, Mogadishu remains neutral. But, despite the official position, reality is different. Consider that the actions of the Federal Government of President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed (aka: Farmajo), implies his alliance to Doha and, by extension, Ankara while the Federal Member States have declared their support for the UAE. Tensions in the Gulf is reinforcing long-term domestic cleavages in Somalia—between Mogadishu and the Federal Member States, the Federal Government and Somaliland (a self-declared state in north-western Somalia) and a motley crew of factions in the capital. To add to this volatile situation, the growing influence of Qatar and Turkey, coupled with the Emirati and (future) withdrawal of African Union forces to Somalia (AMISOM), increase the risks of strengthening extremist Islamist groups in the country—particularly al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda's East African affiliate. This analysis explores the destabilising effect of the Gulf crisis on Somalia tenuous internal power balance.

PARTIALLY IMPARTIAL

Since the crisis erupted, Farmajo has been under pressure from Saudi Arabia and the UAE to sever relations with Doha—in June 2017, Saudi Arabia offered \$80 million to Somalia. In contrast to Somalia's earlier orientation—in 2016 it answered Saudi Arabia's request to cut ties with Iran, receiving \$50 million in aid the very same day—Farmajo chose to remain neutral in the Gulf rift. However, receiving Qatar's financial support for his presidential campaign and filling the governmental posts with Doha-allied officials (including Chief of Staff, Fahad

Yasin, a former employee of Al-Jazeera—who was already accused [2013] of channelling millions of dollars from Qatar for the previous presidential campaign of former President, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud) revealed that Farmajo was not impartial. While Farmajo's government accuses Abu Dhabi of supporting the opposition, especially in the regions, the Emiratis, while denying such allegation, blame Mogadishu for being under the control of Doha. Both sides may have a point.

MOGADISHU-DOHA-ANKARA

At the time of this writing, Qatar is enjoying much warmer relations, than the Emiratis, with Mogadishu. Farmajo has already made two State Visits to Doha this year, compared to none to the UAE. Somalia has become an important corridor for Qatari Airlines banned from its Gulf neighbours' air space. At the same time, Doha is anchoring itself in the country—spreading its influence and anti-Emirate's rhetoric through the media and via a vast network of imams that cooperate with Turkey. Diyanet, Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs, tasked with promoting Turkey as the leader of the Islamic world, recently built mosques in Mogadishu—Somalia Central Mosque, the largest in Somalia, and Haci Tenzile Erdogan Mosque. Turkey openly supports the Muslim Brotherhood and is using Diyanet as a tool of its religious diplomacy—it builds mosques around the world and trains the imams in Ankara before they can preach abroad.

In 2017, it was uncovered that Diyanet, and its affiliates, were spying on behalf of Turkey in Europe in cooperation with Turkish intelligence agency (MIT). Mogadishu has been known as an area of operation for the Muslim Brotherhood, which is loosely organised in Somalia and not very visible on the political scene. The Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated imams in Somalia are said to be funded by Qatar while following the instructions of Turkey to spread the anti-Emirates narrative across Somalia, including among high-ranking officials.

Qatar has also been providing money to Somalia, leading some Western intelligence agencies to believe that some of the funds have found their way to Al-Shabaab—either directly or through its associated charities. Some funds have also slithered into the pockets of government officials. There is a clear link between Qatar and Al-Shabaab through Mohammed Ali Saeed Atm, a former high-ranking member of Al-Shabaab's faction in Puntland. He surrendered to the federal government in 2013 and was given asylum outside Somalia, some sources say in Qatar. In November 2017, Atm was added to the Qatari-linked terrorism blacklist, issued by the Arab Quartet (Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE).

THE UAE'S ALLIANCE WITH FEDERAL MEMBER STATES

Relations between Abu Dhabi and Mogadishu have been declining since the latter rejected the cutting of ties to Qatar. Over the past year, Abu Dhabi, afraid to lose ground in Somalia, and balancing against Qatar's influence in Mogadishu, has been strengthening its ties to the Federal Member States' governments, particularly Somaliland and Puntland, much to the disdain of the Federal Government. Particularly, the contract between Somaliland and the UAE on the construction of an Emirati military base in Somaliland's Berbera Port, which is strategically located close to Yemen and across the Gulf of Aden. The government banned the Emirate's DP World from operating in Somalia after it annulled an agreement penned between DP World, Somaliland and Ethiopia on the management of the Berbera Port, which was set to become a regional hub for many East African countries. The UAE is accused, by Mogadishu, of disrespecting Somalia's sovereignty and undermining its unity. While Qatar continues to pressure the Federal Government to refuse aid from the UAE, the Emirate's continue to consolidate their control over the strategic ports along the coast, pouring money to the regions and closing deals with Member States' governments, but also assisting the secessionist goals of Somaliland.

ABU DHABI-MOGADISHU SPLIT

At the beginning of April 2018, relations between Abu Dhabi and Mogadishu were suspended after years of security cooperation—the UAE helped training and funding thousands of Somali soldiers. Somali secret services interdicted a UAE Royal Jet plane with some 30 Emirati soldiers on board at Mogadishu International Airport. They then seized \$9.6 million designated for the Somali army. This triggered the Emirates' decision to end its support for Somali soldiers and vacate the country. Ten days later, and a day after the UAE shuttered the Shiekh Zayid Hospital in Mogadishu, Qatar donated 30 buses and two large cranes to Somalia. Mohamed Mursal Abdirahman, former Ambassador to Turkey, traded his post of Defence Minister for Speaker of Parliament after his predecessor, Mohammed Osman Jawari, resigned a day after the UAE Mogadishu Airport incident. The role of the Gulf crisis was acute. Indeed, Farmajo's and Jawari's rivalry has intensified in-sync with the perception of backing opposite sides: Farmajo in the Qatar-Turkey camp and Jawari with the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

In May, following the UAE-Mogadishu freeze, the heads of Member States' governments expressed their support to the Emirates, well-aware of how important the Gulf state-as-an-investor is for them. The country remains largely fragmented. Contracts between the UAE and Somaliland, in combination with the

recent ban on visas for Somali citizens by the Emirates and, in exchange, issuing visas for citizens of the self-proclaimed Republic of Somaliland, imply that Abu Dhabi is en route to recognising Somaliland's sovereignty. This would generate far-reaching consequences for Abu Dhabi's relations with Mogadishu, and also possibly trigger a domino effect.

TAKING A BACK-STEP

Construction is currently underway for an Emirate's military base in Somaliland's Port of Berbera. Turkey opened its largest overseas military base in Mogadishu in 2017, whereas the Qataris remain militarily unrepresented in the region. While Turkey seems to have ambitions of becoming regional player through provision humanitarian aid and establishing economic relations, the UAE has more security related goals, explaining its interest in ports along the shore—in Eritrea, Djibouti and now Somalia—strategically located across the Gulf of Aden, proximate to Yemen.

Until Somalis resolve their internal political disputes and take steps towards unity themselves, the fight against Islamic militants from Al-Shabaab and stability of the country is lost. The government needs to prove to the people of Somalia that it is worth supporting more than Al-Shabaab, however political squabbles, corruption and the inability to provide basic services discredit it. The Gulf-centred rivalries are not the main reason for a disintegrating Somalia, but they are certainly exacerbating tensions. While Qatar and Turkey use political ties and significant humanitarian aid deliveries as leverage on the Somali government, Saudi Arabia has reportedly used financial aid, and the UAE its provision of financial support and training for Somali defence forces. Somalia is a country that is too fragmented to be under the influence of one camp, which effectively sentences the country to be torn by the Gulf dispute, until all the parties involved take a step back and realise that internal stability is good for regional and supra-regional development.