

Roundtable Takeaways

Beyond National Borders: Unpacking Conflict Dynamics in the Horn of Africa

School of Government, Luiss Guido Carli

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Moderating:

- Virginie Collombier, Scientific Coordinator, Luiss Mediterranean Platform
- Carlo Palleschi, Associate Researcher, Luiss Mediterranean Platform

Speakers:

- Mehari Taddele Maru, Professor, European University Institute
- Federico Donelli, Professor, University of Trieste
- Jérôme Tubiana, Adviser, Médecins Sans Frontières

Introduction

The Horn of Africa is a focal point for great-power competition, attracting China, the US, and Gulf states. As a result, the region is grappling with numerous conflict hotspots that pose significant challenges to peace and stability, both regionally and beyond. Somalia's civil war has caused widespread displacement and economic disruptions. Ethiopia is now dealing with a civil war that has escalated into a regional conflict involving Eritrea and Sudan, while Sudan's 2023 war complicates relations with Chad, Egypt, and South Sudan. The Nile water dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia further complicates regional dynamics.

This Mediterranean Platform roundtable explores the Horn of Africa's conflict dynamics, focusing on their transnational nature and the impact of geopolitical competition, aiming to find strategies to address cross-border tensions and foster stability in the region.

What's happening in the Horn of Africa?

Federico Donelli

Can you give us a general breakdown of what's happening in the Horn of Africa?

Everything happening in the Horn is directly related to what's going on at the regional and more broadly, the global levels.

The Red Sea region has become a microcosm of the present and future global order, with multiple state and non-state actors. There are multiple hierarchies and great powers have more economic and military leverage. At the same time, they are also affected by local actors. This intersection highlights the importance of the Red Sea for global, middle, and local powers alike.

How do the key countries in the region fit in the conflicts?

Countries like Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Egypt are not extra-regional actors because the two shores of the Red Sea are like shores of a lake, so both sides have deep relations. There is more of a Cold War issue, with the Horn of Africa on one side and the Arabian Peninsula on the other.

How is this related to the events on the global level?

The international order is changing, and when that happens, middle or regional powers see opportunities to increase their political and economic influence. They try to establish ties with local actors.

Do the key countries in the region influence the local actors?

The relations are much more dynamic than that. Actors in the Horn of Africa are not passive. Instead, they have their own agency and follow their own interests. Local actors are partnering more with Gulf States, Turkey, and others to reconfigure regional balances and address domestic issues.

What are the implications of these new relations?

There are two main implications.

First, there is a rise of conflicts in the region. Many local actors feel empowered to pursue ambitious policies. And second, this results in a struggle for resources, which is what we see in Somalia and Sudan.

What led up to the current situation in the Horn of Africa?

The Arab Uprisings can be considered the backdrop to the current events. The reshuffling of dynamics gave us more fragile political institutions which have paved the way for some problems within the key regional states like Sudan and Ethiopia.

Who are the rising Middle Powers in the Horn of Africa?

Mehari Maru

How are the countries on both sides of the Red Sea connected?

There are many shared issues, such as religion, security, immigration issues, humanitarian affairs, and disasters like locusts. Both sides are also linked to the Mediterranean Sea and the Sahel region.

What are the main issues in the Horn of Africa?

There are three core issues playing out affecting the state of peace and security in the region.

First, there is the usual issues of identity politics, which always turn up in contexts of diversity governance. Second, there are also resource politics of different kinds of resources. And third, there are power politics and dynamics at the national and regional levels.

What are the global actors' policies toward the region?

China is playing a big role; we can see its influence everywhere. On the other hand, the US policy tries to contain China and emphasizes stability, even at the cost of preventing genocide in Sudan, Ethiopia, or elsewhere.

Stability at any cost seems to be the policy in response to great power competition.

Why is this the case?

The US and other countries have much bigger issues to worry about in power politics. This is coming at the expense of the value systems that were foundational in the peace and security architecture built over the past three decades.

You mentioned the rise of middle powers. Who are the middle powers?

Historically, they've been Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Egypt. Their place is still there, but they aren't as influential as they once were. The emerging middle powers are the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

How has the rise of these new middle powers affected the Horn of Africa?

There is significant change on three levels.

First, the middle powers are able to influence the domestic politics, balance of power, and power dynamics in the Horn of Africa. People like MBZ have a big influence on the wars in Ethiopia and Sudan.

Second, middle powers have also affected decision-making in regional and multilateral systems. For example, the rules-based order is affected, as are the UN Security Council, and the African Union system in responding to the regional issues in general.

And third, the nature of the cooperation between middle powers and Horn of Africa states is also significantly affected. For instance, the UAE has blocked the process towards holding the RSF accountable, influencing powers like the UK and others.

What have been the humanitarian impacts of the conflicts in the Horn of Africa?

Jérôme Tubiana

How has Doctors Without Borders's involvement in various countries in the region helped you better understand the displacement crisis in Africa?

With the recent Sudanese crisis, we began to realize that when we work in a country like Sudan or in the Sudanese refugee camps in Chad, we are present in a place of both departure and transit. We encounter the same populations that we later find in our migrant projects in Libya and Tunisia. Additionally, we have a rescue vessel in the Mediterranean, and we are active in Italy, France, and the UK. This gives us a unique perspective on the massive displacement crisis in Africa.

How big is the displacement crisis right now?

The current displacement crisis has been building over the past decade and is now the world's worst displacement crisis. It has already become a refugee crisis as well.

How is this expected to impact the surrounding countries?

There's a big diaspora in neighboring countries, though not much further north of the Mediterranean yet. We can expect the numbers to rise everywhere.

There are more than 8 million displaced people in Sudan. It's estimated that between 1.5 and 2 million are refugees, including 600,000 in Chad. This number is in addition to the 400,000 refugees who were already there since 2003. In Egypt, there are also 500,000 new refugees, adding to a significant older diaspora of close to 2 million people.

Do the displaced mostly stay in refugee camps?

Some of the new refugees do not want to stay for years in very poor refugee camps on the borders. They come to Chad and see that their predecessors have been there for 20 years in very poor conditions, so some of them move very quickly.

We know only a small number of the war-displaced and refugees have moved on to the Mediterranean and Europe; it may only be a few thousand. They use both old and new routes that go through Libya, as well as Chad to Niger, then Algeria, and Tunisia.

Who are the most vulnerable among the refugees?

The poorest and most vulnerable are definitely from the Horn of Africa. They are the main victims of trafficking and torture for ransom, a practice that started in Egypt but has spread to other countries, especially Libya and now Tunisia.

The main victims are particularly from Eritrea and Ethiopia. Libyans and North Africans often confuse both these nationalities, calling them Habasha or Abyssinians, though the number of Ethiopians going to Libya is smaller compared to Eritreans. Many Somalians and Sudanese have also migrated to Libya, although not in significant numbers.

Has UNHCR responded to these vulnerabilities?

Yes, the UNHCR has negotiated with Libyan authorities to recognize and register people from the Horn of Africa. Initially limited to three nationalities, it has now expanded to five: Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, and South Sudan. No West or Central African nationals are eligible for recognition or registration by the UNHCR in Libya, which is unfair.

How have European policies addressed this crisis?

It is immediately labeled as a migration crisis, so there have been some paradoxical reactions and policies. On one hand, there are some welcoming efforts, but predominantly, the response is one of further border closures and hostility.