

Turkey, United Arab Emirates and other Middle Eastern States

Middle Eastern Base Race in North-Eastern Africa

This text is a part of the FOI report *Foreign military bases and installations in Africa*. Twelve state actors are included in the report: China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Russia, Spain, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and United States.

Middle Eastern states are increasing their military presence in Africa. Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), two influential Sunni powers with contrary views on regional order and political Islam, are expanding their foothold in north-eastern Africa. Turkey has opened a military training facility in Somalia and may build a naval dock for military use in Sudan. The UAE has established bases in Eritrea and Libya, and is currently constructing a base in Somaliland. However, Turkey and UAE are not the only Middle Eastern countries with a military presence in Africa. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Israel, and Iran, also seem to have military activities on the Horn of Africa.

The on-going base race in Africa reflects the rising ambitions of several Middle Eastern states; their rivalries over the regional security order, political influence, and religious ideology; their need to gain access to markets and resources, and to secure sea lines of communications (SLOCs) and control of ports. The overall security dynamics are affected by the rivalry among leading Sunni states of the Middle East, i.e. between the status-quo bloc led by the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and an opposing faction headed by Turkey and Qatar. The developments in Africa are also related to the conflict between Iran and its regional foes, i.e. Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. These two overarching Middle Eastern conflicts are played out in the wars in Libya and Yemen, and contribute to the base race in Africa.

TURKEY – NEO-OTTOMAN TURKEY LOOKS SOUTH

Turkey has an interest in strengthening its economic ties, solidifying its political influence, and promoting its version of political Islam in Africa. Ankara applies the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, renewed diplomatic efforts, foreign aid and support for the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) – and military presence – to secure its strategic interests in the

region. Turkey's political interests are in line with those of Qatar on the question of political Islam and the MB, but clash with the agenda of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The conflict among the Sunni powers has intensified since the Arab Spring in 2010, in particular since the UAE-led blockade against Qatar in 2017. Eastern Africa has thus become an arena for the rivalry between regional powers of the Middle East.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his AK party have strengthened the Sunni Muslim identity of the Turkish state, while de facto approving a neo-Ottoman foreign policy that implies a growing focus on the Middle East and northern Africa. Turkey tries to secure its interests by supporting MB-affiliated movements and a deepening of economic ties with Muslim African states, and by pursuing a naval modernization programme. Turkey is constructing a 'light aircraft carrier', which reportedly will be ready in 2021, and could be deployed to African waters, e.g. in the Red Sea region. Thus, military bases in Africa might be perceived as serving Turkey's long-term strategic interests.

As part of the efforts to secure its interests in Africa, Turkey has built a military training facility in Mogadishu (Somalia) and signed an agreement for the development of the port of Suakin (Sudan). Somalia and Sudan have Sunni majorities and influential MB-linked constituencies. They are also markets for Turkish products; are located near key shipping lanes in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, respectively; and in the past had close ties with the Ottoman Empire.

A military training facility in Somalia

Turkey is strengthening its economic, political, religious, and military role in Somalia. Erdogan visited Mogadishu in 2011, when many world leaders avoided the crisis-laden country. Since then, Turkey has invested heavy economic and diplomatic energy in

its relations with Somalia. Turkey's largest embassy in Africa is located in Mogadishu, while Somalia has been a major recipient of foreign aid. The strengthening of bilateral economic and political ties has been followed by a deepening of defence relations. During Erdogan's second visit to Mogadishu, in 2015, an agreement to establish a Turkish military training facility was signed. Moreover, in 2014, the Turkish conglomerate Albayrak took over the rights to operate Mogadishu's port for at least 20 years, and promised to raise it to world standards.

In September 2017, Turkey inaugurated its base in Mogadishu; base occupies about 400 hectares and includes a military academy. About 200 Turkish officers will be deployed there. Turkey claims that the purpose of the base is to train the Somali army, so that it becomes more unified and capable of fighting terror organisations such as al-Shabaab. Given Ankara's political and economic interests, the strategic location of Mogadishu near key SLOCs, and the construction of a UAE base in the autonomous region of Somaliland, one might suspect that the Turkish military presence in Somalia will be long-term and not limited to 'the war on terror'.

A historic and strategic port in Sudan

Turkey has also stepped up its diplomatic and economic engagement with Sudan, which could result in the creation of a new defence facility on the Red Sea. Turkey has earned goodwill in Khartoum by supporting the removal of sanctions against the regime of Omar al-Bashir. In December 2017, President Erdogan visited Khartoum and signed an agreement on Suakin, a strategically located island and port in the Red Sea. Suakin was once a major harbour of the Ottoman Empire, located on the opposite shore from Mecca and Medina.

According to media reports, Turkey will not only rebuild and administer Suakin for an undisclosed period of time, but establish tourist facilities for pilgrims on *hajj* and *umrah*, and build naval docks for both commercial and military use. The foreign minister of Sudan has claimed that the agreement with Turkey 'could result in any kind of military cooperation.' Moreover, Erdogan has given instructions to Turkish authorities to assist the Sudanese army and police force. However, reports of possible Turkish military facilities in Sudan, and defence cooperation with Qatar, have stirred up negative reactions in Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Egypt is in a border conflict with Sudan, while Cairo's close allies in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are concerned about the deepening of military ties between Turkey and Qatar and their support for the MB and political Islam. Turkey consequently denied that it has plans to establish a military base in Suakin. Yet, the future presence of a Turkish naval base

situated on the Red Sea, between the Suez Canal and Bab al-Mandab, could be perceived as serving Ankara's strategic interests in Africa.

UAE – 'LITTLE SPARTA' ON A WAR FOOTING

Strategic interests

The UAE is a rising Middle Eastern power with a growing military footprint in East Africa. Its interests are, seemingly, to bolster the Emirate's political role in the Islamic world; to secure economic interests (SLOCs, ports, resources, and markets); and to contain both political Islam (MB) and its supporters (Qatar and Turkey), as well as the regional role of Iran, another rival. The UAE also wants to strengthen its proxies in the on-going wars in Libya and Yemen. Because of its national interests, the UAE has established a base in eastern Libya and a string of military facilities in Yemen, Eritrea, and Somaliland, i.e. near Bab al-Mandab, and the shipping lanes in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

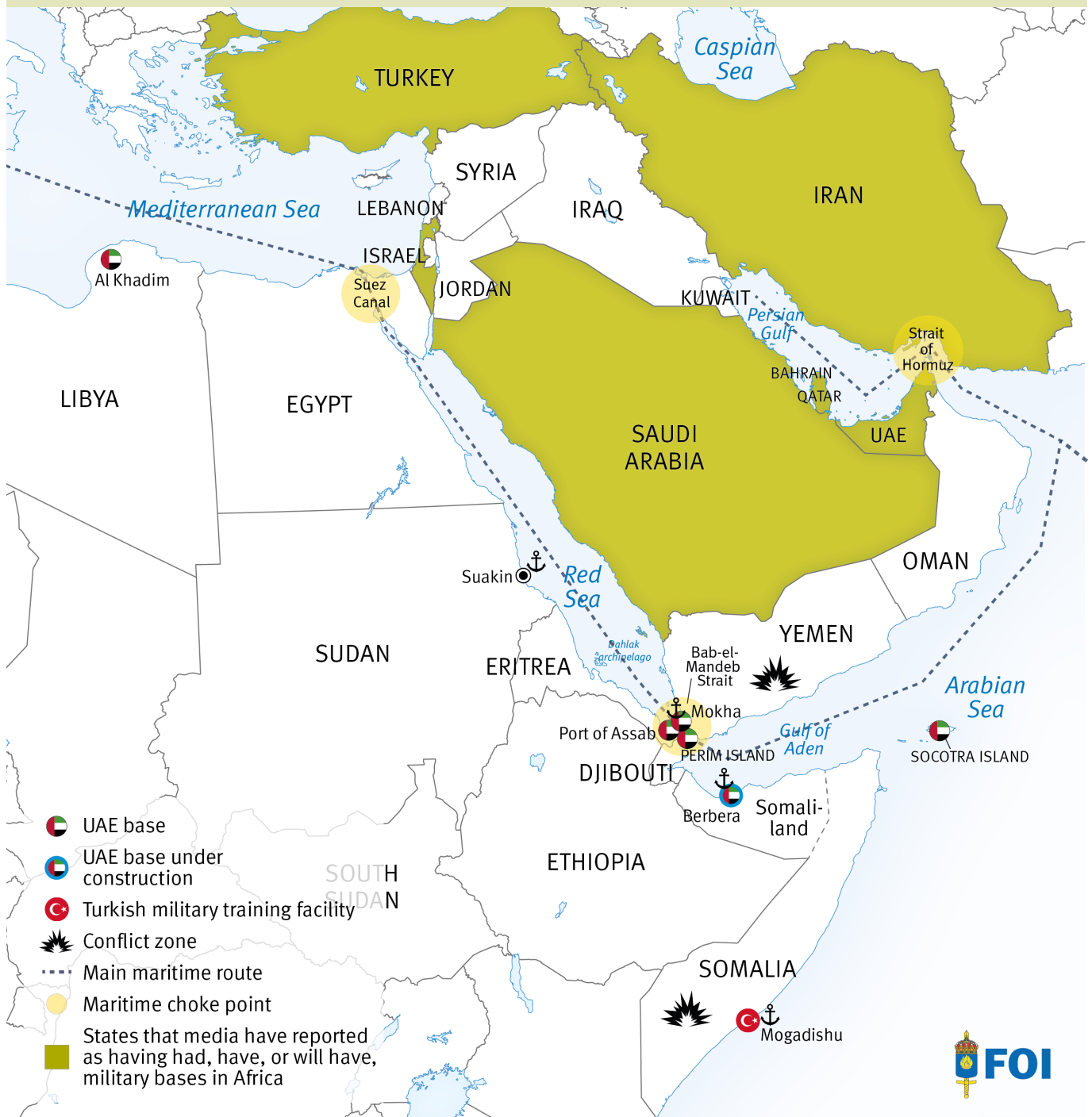
The increasing role of the UAE in African affairs is linked to the assertive foreign policy of the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. The forceful Emirati foreign policy is reinforced by the huge incomes from energy exports during the past decade, and large investments in military capabilities.

The UAE has long spent billions of dollars on defence equipment, but until recently has neither been able to translate these acquisitions into actual military power and nor willing to use their armed forces in operations abroad. This reality is changing. James Mattis, the former US defence secretary, has described the UAE as 'Little Sparta', since 'they're not just willing to fight – they are great warriors'. This is likely an exaggeration; the UAE relies largely on foreign soldiers and proxies. Yet, the political role and military assertiveness of the UAE is on the rise – and affects African security, from Egypt and Libya to Somalia and Eritrea. The UAE is thus the key driver of the Middle Eastern base race in Africa.

A base in eastern Libya

As a rising military power hoping to shape the future political order of the Middle East, the UAE participated in the NATO-led military intervention in Libya in 2011. In the subsequent civil war, the UAE supported Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) in the eastern parts of the country, against the government in Tripoli and groups linked to the Muslim Brotherhood (and Qatar), based in the west. In 2014, the UAE reportedly conducted air strikes against Islamist militias in Libya in support of the LNA and in coordination with Egypt. In 2016, satellite imagery revealed an Emirati air base, with American aircraft and Chinese drones, in Al Khadim, in eastern Libya, an area controlled by the LNA. The UAE is thus lending support to Haftar as 'the strong man' of post-Gaddafi Libya, in the same way as it has assisted General al-Sisi in Egypt against the government of the MB (and its

Assessment of Middle Eastern countries' military bases and installations in northeastern Africa



Sources: FOI, based on The Libya Observer (2016), The UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea (2015), Stratfor (2012, 2016), Foreign Affairs (2019), Anadolu Agency (2017), Newsweek (2018), EIA (2017), Lefebvre (2012), Financial Times (2017) Reuters (2017), Al Jazeera (2017).

supporters in Ankara and Doha), in 2013. An airbase in Libya is a useful tool in the Emirati effort to influence the outcome in Libya and to limit the regional role of the MB, Qatar, and Turkey.

Bases at key SLOCs in Eritrea and Somaliland

The UAE has constructed a military base in Eritrea and is currently building another in Somaliland, partly to

conduct operations in Yemen, but also to secure key SLOCs and commercial ports in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

In 2014, the UAE and Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen to defeat the Houthis, a militia with links to Iran that had taken control over Sanaa, the capital, and large parts of the country along the Red Sea and near Bab al-Mandab. The UAE led an amphibious campaign

to recapture Aden and retake southern Yemen. For the operations in Yemen, the UAE was allowed to base troops and aircraft in neighbouring Eritrea, on the eastern side of the Bab al-Mandab. Since beginning of the war, in 2014, the UAE has established several bases in Yemen as well as in Eritrea. It has also signed a 30-year leasing agreement for an air and naval base in Assab (Eritrea), begun construction of an airstrip on the island of Perim (Yemen), in the Bab al-Mandab, as well as signed an agreement with Somaliland for the construction of a base in the harbour of Berbera.

The UAE's military bases on the Horn of Africa are not about the war in Yemen alone, but are arguably also expressions of wider Emirati ambitions to shape and secure economic and political developments both in Africa and in the Middle East. Emirati agreements on commercial ports increasingly go hand in hand with the establishment of military bases. In 2016, the state-controlled Dubai Ports (DP) World, '... won a 30-year concession with an automatic 10-year extension for the management and development of a multi-purpose port project at Berbera [in Somaliland].' Following a row with Djibouti over the Doraleh port, which led to the expulsion of DP World, the UAE fixed its gaze on the Eritrean port of Assab. Currently, DP World also operates ports on long-term concessions in Maputo (Mozambique), Dakar (Senegal), Sokhna (Egypt), as well as Algiers and Djen-Djen (Algeria).

The UAE's deepening of military ties with Somaliland has heightened tensions with the central government in Mogadishu, while its support for Haftar has contributed to the on-going civil war in Libya. However, the UAE has also used its leverage on the Horn of Africa to push for a peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

OTHER MIDDLE EASTERN STATES

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, and Israel also have strategic interests on the Horn of Africa. Reports of past, present, and future military bases or installations in Africa have appeared in media.

Saudi Arabia, which has considerable financial, political, and religious influence in northern Africa, strives together with the UAE to shape the regional order by limiting the influence of Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood. Saudi Arabia has signed an agreement with the government in Djibouti for the construction of a military base. Yet, the rationale behind a base in Djibouti seems unclear, since Saudi Arabia already has bases on its territory along the Red Sea. So far, Saudi Arabia has not built any bases in Djibouti.

Qatar has long punched above its weight in regional affairs, e.g. by applying media power (Al Jazeera) and backing groups associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Doha played a key role in the early days of the Arab Spring by supporting Islamist groups in Egypt, Libya and Syria. In 2010, following clashes between Djibouti and Eritrea, Qatar stepped in to mediate and sent about 200 peace-keeping troops to the border between them. The Qatari star has nevertheless faded in recent years in the wake of Saudi and Emirati pushback, the Egyptian counter-revolution, and the failure of the MB in Syria. Following the UAE-led embargo against Qatar in 2017, Doha chose to pull back its troops from the border between Eritrea and Djibouti.

Iran has an interest in increasing its influence and monitoring trade on the Horn of Africa, yet seems to have played only a minor military role in the region. According to a report by Stratfor, an American commercial geopolitical intelligence company, in 2012 Iran had military installations in Assab, Eritrea. Given Eritrea's deepening relationship with the UAE, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, it seems unlikely that the Iranian installations remain in the country.

Israel has an interest in monitoring the traffic in the Red Sea and on the Horn of Africa in order to track Iranian ships and interdict weapon transfers to Hamas in Gaza. Israeli military intelligence (AMAN) reportedly operates a signal station co-jointly with the NSA in the Dahlak archipelago of Eritrea, in the Red Sea near Bab al-Mandab.

LOOKING AHEAD

Primarily due to its location, the Horn of Africa will most likely remain a key strategic region for various Middle Eastern powers. As long as many of the major powers of the Middle East are led by strongmen with great power ambitions and deep pockets, the base race in Africa is likely to continue and result in ripple effects on local politics and regional security.

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